

Chapter 1

Number 4 Privet Drive lay quiet and dark when Remus Lupin and Severus Snape apparated at the front gate under the protection of invisibility cloaks. The two men looked around carefully before shedding their cloaks. Remus Lupin opened the gate and walked up the path with the quietly grumbling Potions Master following behind him. Severus Snape's sullen company was something that Remus could have done without but Dumbledore had insisted that Remus be accompanied to check on Harry when the wards on Privet Drive had alerted that there was a problem. Severus had been the only one available at short notice and he had not wanted to waste time arguing. Dumbledore had not been able to decipher what the wards had been trying to tell him except he was certain that Harry was still alive.

Remus rushed up to the front door and rapped loudly on it. He and Snape waited impatiently for a response. When none came, Remus pounded again on the door. When again there was no response from the house, he pulled out his wand and, after quickly looking around to ensure that they were not being watched, he whispered, "Alohomora". The door clicked and he pushed it opened and the two men walked into the house.

"Come on," Remus said with a gesture, "Harry's room is upstairs."

Severus sniffed dismissively but followed the werewolf up the stairs. Remus made his way to Harry's bedroom and threw the door open. He came to sudden stop two steps into the room and the Potions Master nearly bumped into him.

"What is it, Lupin?" Snape said quietly but acidly.

Remus turned and looked at him in confusion and sorrow. "He's not here, Severus." Remus turned away and entered the room. He was back in a few seconds holding a limp, white, feathered body in his hands. "But now I am truly afraid for Harry. He would not have willingly allowed this."

Severus took Hedwig's body from Lupin and examined it. He gave the limp body back to the werewolf and pointed to the neck, "The owl's neck has been broken; twisted sharply and violently." Snape's lips thinned and his eyes took on a grim look, "I think we had better find Potter."

Remus looked down at the bird for a moment longer before going back into the bedroom and laying her on Harry's school trunk. He came back to where Snape was standing and the Potions Master saw the deep anger growing in the werewolf's eyes.

"Come on," Remus growled, "I think I know where he is." Remus started for the stairs, taking Snape a little by surprise. He quickly caught up and asked, "Where are we going? Surely he will be in one of the other rooms?"

Remus flicked him a quick glance as they headed downstairs. "No, Vernon and Petunia used to keep him confined in a cupboard under the stairs when he was growing up. I suspect that's where he is now." Remus frowned in concern. "Though surely he would have heard us come in and yelled."

Severus stopped dead and stared in disbelief at Remus. Lupin stopped when he realised that Snape was no longer following and looked back in surprise. Snape was staring at him with growing anger on his face. "The boy was kept in a cupboard?" he said with a snarl.

Remus raised an ironic eyebrow. "I didn't know you cared, Severus. I thought you hated the boy," he said dryly.

Severus sneered at him and said with acid precision, "I dislike the latitude the boy is given with regards to the rules, I dislike the boy's insolence and rudeness to both me and others and I dislike the boy's typical Gryffindor thoughtlessness and brainless behaviour. But I would never condone any child being brought up with such neglect and abuse!"

Remus stared at him for a moment and then gave him a nod of apology and the two men made their way to the door of the cupboard. They found it locked and could not hear any sounds behind it. They exchanged glances and Remus pulled out his wand again and with a quick 'Alohomora' unlocked the door. He ripped it open and both men flinched back from the sight that confronted them.

Harry was indeed in the cupboard. He was lying curled up on his side in a foetal position, facing the door. He was unconscious, breathing stertorously and painfully. Where his thin t-shirt had pulled up at his waist they could see the black bruising but it was his face that had caused the men to pull back in shock. Harry's face was a bloody mess. It was impossible to tell exactly what damage had been done, the blood was masking everything.

Remus' breath caught several times and he had to turn away from the sight. Snape pushed past him with a terrible look on his face and gently scooped the boy up. Harry moaned and his breathing became shallower and more pained. Severus moved quickly into the living room and placed Harry gently onto the couch. He turned back to the silently weeping Remus and snapped, "Apparate to Arabella's and get Albus and Poppy here right now."

Remus disappeared with a crack and Snape turned back to the grievously injured boy. He gently lifted the t-shirt and saw that Harry's torso was almost completely covered in the black bruising they had glimpsed. There were indications that the bruising extended below the boy's hips but Snape left that for the moment. He gently pushed the boy's hair away from his face, carefully pulling away locks that had been glued down by the drying blood. He conjured a bowl of warm water and a cloth and began gently cleaning the blood off Harry's face. He started at the boy's jaw and was absurdly relieved to find that although there were distinct signs of bruising under the blood and the boy's bottom lip had been split in at least two places, there did not seem to be any further damage.

As he worked higher it became obvious that Harry had been worked over quite extensively. The boy's nose was clearly broken and much of the blood had come from that source as well as his lip. It was when he went to work higher that he was forced to stop and wait for more expert hands. There were tiny shards of glass peppering the boy's face around his eyes and, as far as Severus could tell, the amount of glass there did not account for the amount of glass that would be found in the boy's spectacles. With a wince, he realised that some of the glass must have penetrated the boy's eyes.

He was just sitting back on his heels when three loud cracks indicated the arrival of Remus Lupin, Albus Dumbledore and Poppy Pomfrey. Both Albus and Poppy gave exclamations of horror and the school nurse darted forward, pushing Severus aside. He quickly stood to make room for her and joined Albus and Remus. The three men watched as Poppy whipped her wand out and started muttering various spells. Finally she stood, pointed her wand at Harry and muttered, "Conservo". She turned to the three men, her face grave.

"He needs to go to St Mungo's, Albus, I've got him stabilised for now and I've put him in a form of stasis so that nothing can get worse but he needs to go to St Mungo's," she said. The three men looked at each other and Remus began to protest. Albus held his hands up but before he could do more than that, Severus spoke.

"He can't," Snape said bluntly, ignoring Poppy's protests. "If you take him there, the Dark Lord will know shortly afterwards and the boy will be dead. The Dark Lord would not hesitate to attack St Mungo's if he could be sure that he would be able to kill Potter." Snape hesitated and gestured towards Harry. "Look at him, a child could kill him right now. We cannot allow the Dark Lord to know that this has happened."

Albus closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "Of course Severus, you are right. Poppy, take him to Hogwarts and do everything that you can for him. Severus, go with her. Your expertise with Potions will be invaluable. You may use the fireplace; I took long enough to ensure that it was connected to the Floo network."

Poppy Pomfrey opened her mouth to argue but then shut it and turned back to Harry. She waved her wand and muttered, "Mobilicorpus". She took a handful of Floo powder from the bag that Dumbledore held out to her and threw it into the fire that had been

conjured in the grate. The flames blazed green and she stepped into the fire, a firm grip on Harry, yelling, "Hogwarts Hospital wing". Snape watched as she disappeared and stepped forward to grab a handful of Floo powder and followed her.

Remus and Dumbledore watched them go and then the Headmaster turned very calmly to Remus and asked, "Where are the Dursley's?"

Remus looked around in surprise, having honestly forgotten about the Dursley's the moment he had found Harry.

"I...I don't know, Albus," he stammered. "They didn't answer when we knocked; we had to break in. The house was dark and nobody come out to challenge us when we were upstairs." A memory came back to Remus and he grabbed Dumbledore's arm. "Merlin!" he gasped. "Harry's owl! Albus, she's dead. Her neck was broken, according to Severus, deliberately."

Dumbledore's eyes filled with tears and he closed them. When they opened they were full of quiet rage though he patted Remus' hand gently where it clung to his robes.

"Let us search the house," he said calmly though his eyes were still full of rage, "and see what there is to see."

The two men split up and searched the house from top to bottom, finishing in Harry's bedroom. Remus came in to find Dumbledore

sitting on Harry's bed gently stroking Hedwig's feathers. He looked up at Remus' approach, his eyes sad. "Well?"

Remus sat down heavily next to him. "There is no sign of the Dursley's here, though both Vernon and Petunia's room and Dudley's room show signs of a hasty departure. There are suitcases missing from both rooms and clothes as well. I do not think they were coerced into leaving, Albus, I think they left of their own accord after..." Remus' voice trailed off.

"After they beat Harry into submission, realised what they had done and feared our retribution," Dumbledore finished with a dangerous quietness.

"Yes," Remus replied heavily. He stared at his hands for a moment then finally his rage began to get the better of his shock. Anger began to kindle in his amber eyes and he managed to look startlingly wolf-like. He started up from the bed and began to pace.

"Albus," he grated, "we cannot allow those...those people to get away with this! We must do something!" His voice rose to a menacing growl.

Dumbledore stood up, the anger in his eyes matching Remus' and there was no sign in his manner and bearing of the slightly dotty Headmaster. He stood tall and strong and anyone observing would have had no doubt as to the reasons why Voldemort feared this man above all others. Nevertheless, the hand he laid on Remus' shoulder was gentle and his voice was calm. "We will, Remus, we will. For now we will return to Hogwarts. In the morning we will set things in motion."

Remus nodded and picked up Hedwig. He handed her to Dumbledore who gently cradled the owl in one arm. Remus cast the spell to hover Harry's trunk after making sure that there was nothing of the boy's left in the room. He directed the trunk out of the room and the two men made their way down to the living room and from there, by Floo, to Hogwarts.

In the Hogwarts hospital wing, Poppy Pomfrey laboured over her unconscious patient. Sevrus aided her with quiet efficiency, quickly summoning from either her stores or his any potions she had need of. As the potion bottles were lined up on the table beside the bed, Severus temper began to mount. The extent of the damage that had been done to the boy soon became plain. Potions for concussion and shock soon lined up alongside potions to repair internal injuries and blood loss.

Poppy had gently extracted the slivers of glass in Harry's face and repaired the wounds. She was now turning to his eyes. She gently pried one eyelid open and gasped. Severus leaned forward and saw what distressed her so much. The boy's eyes had been pierced by many slivers of glass. Poppy delicately began to remove them with her wand, making sure to heal the wounds carefully.

"He must have had his eyes open when his glasses were shattered," she muttered to herself. "Though why? Surely he would have seen the blow coming and even if he couldn't avoid it, have closed his eyes."

Severus had no answer for her and could only hold out the container for the glass shards. When she finished both eyes, she washed the remaining blood from Harry's face and placed a bandage over his eyes. She took the container from Severus' hand, gathered the remnants of the bandages and other medical accoutrements and walked quickly out to another room, the movement of her shoulders suggesting to Snape that she was crying.

At that moment, the Headmaster and Remus Lupin walked through the door.

"How is he?" Lupin asked urgently.

"Poppy has just gone to clean up," Severus answered. "She will know better than I."

Remus nodded, sat on the edge of the bed and gently took one of Harry's hands in his own. Dumbledore moved to stand beside him and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. Poppy came bustling back out of the far room, her eyes a little red, and nodded grimly to the three men.

"It is bad, gentlemen, but it could have been worse," she began. "He has been beaten quite badly. There is extensive severe bruising and four of his ribs have been broken. He had some internal bleeding but I have stopped that and the ribs have been set. His nose has been broken but again I have set this. All of this will heal well." Here she

hesitated, unsure of how to go on, finally looking up at the Headmaster. "But Albus, his eyes. I...I cannot be completely certain until he wakes but the damage was severe. Several of the slivers of glass had completely pierced the eyeball. He may retain some sight, Albus, but I fear that he will most likely be blind."

A long silence fell at these words. Finally, Remus stirred and asked softly, "How...how long before we know for sure?"

Poppy sighed. "I want to keep his eyes bandaged for a week to allow the wounds to heal, so at least that long. He should wake tomorrow morning but he will be very groggy due to the effects of the various potions he has been given. He will need someone with him at all times."

Remus immediately volunteered and Dumbledore nodded as well. "I am sure many of the teachers will be willing to stay with him," he said. "I will ask and we can set up a roster. Severus?"

Snape, who had been staring at Harry with a closed and unreadable expression, started. "What?" he asked in surprise.

"Can we put you on the list to watch over Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"Yes," he said shortly and to the surprise of the others. He ignored them and turned to Dumbledore. "What will be done to those who did this?" he asked.

"It appears that the Dursley's have fled, realising that we would not permit this to go unanswered," Dumbledore replied. "Tomorrow morning I shall contact the various authorities, both Muggle and Wizard, and set things in motion." Here Dumbledore turned back to Remus. "I take it you intend to stay with Harry tonight." Remus nodded an affirmative. "Then I can rely on you to question Harry when he wakes to ascertain exactly what happened." Remus nodded again. "Good. Do it gently, Remus, do not stress the boy too much or Poppy will have both our heads."

Poppy nodded emphatically and started to shoo Dumbledore and Snape out of the door. "You can discuss whatever you need elsewhere, Headmaster, the boy needs quiet," she scolded. Dumbledore smiled and nodded to her and gestured for Snape to precede him out the door. Poppy bustled back to the bed and patted Remus on the shoulder. She conjured a comfortable chair and fussed Remus into sitting in it. She patted him on the shoulder again and left him to his vigil.

She turned back for one last look before she left the room. Remus was sitting just where she had left him, amber eyes glued to the pale form in the bed, one of Harry's hands still held gently in his own. She turned her gaze to Harry and shuddered slightly. The boy looked so small and wan lying in the bed. From past experience she knew the boy had great depths of stubborn strength, she hoped it would be enough this time.

Dawn found Severus Snape seated in a chair in front of the fire in his rooms. He had found himself unable to sleep and had drawn his dressing gown over his pyjamas and taken himself out to somewhere where he could think properly. Last night had been something of a shock. He had always had the impression that Harry Potter had grown up in a fairly well-off family. While that was indeed true, it had never occurred to Severus that Harry had never shared in this largesse.

Lupin's revelation that Harry had spent much of his life living in a cupboard under the stairs had infuriated and shocked the Potions Master. That a wizard, even one as annoying as Potter, should have been treated in such a way by mere Muggles had touched a nerve in Severus' pure-blood heart. Yet he also knew that this was something that could never be made public. It would merely seem to reinforce everything that the Dark Lord and his followers stood for.

He wondered why Dumbledore had continued to send the boy back to his relatives. Snape knew of the blood protection offered by the boy's Aunt but an equivalent protection could have been organised elsewhere, particularly with a wizarding family. Severus snorted; the Weasley's would have undoubtedly been thrilled to take in the boy.

Severus frowned and considered the idea that perhaps Albus hadn't known. Merlin knows, the boy was good at hiding things and even better at not telling adults things they needed to know. Severus was sure that if the boy's family had been beating him on a regular basis Albus would not have hesitated to remove him. Perhaps, he mused, last night's events were a one-off. His frown deepened, it was a fairly extreme reaction for a one-off event, though Severus knew that the boy was quite capable of driving people to distraction.

He spent some time considering the boy's injuries. The gross injuries, the broken bones, the bruises, would heal and heal well. Within a week or two, Potter should be ready to leave the hospital wing. It was the boy's eyes that were the concern. Severus found himself echoing Poppy's question; why had the boy not closed his eyes? Had he not seen the blow coming? How was that possible? He had seen the injuries himself and did not agree with Poppy's ridiculous optimism. The boy would be left blind. The slivers in his eyes had not been large, but there had been a lot of them and many had been quite long. His corneas and lenses were undoubtedly damaged beyond repair and many of the slivers had been long enough to damage the retinas as well. One or two of them in both eyes were long enough and had been in the right area to possibly have damaged the optic nerve as well.

Severus' eyes narrowed; now that he had time to really think about it, he had thought the glass had come solely from the boy's glasses. But there had been too much of it. And some of the slivers had been very long; far longer than what could come from lens glass. There had been no signs of broken glass anywhere that he had seen and Albus and Lupin had not reported any. A muscle twitched in Severus' cheek. Glass was not difficult to clean up and his discussion with Albus after they had left the hospital wing had made it clear that the Dursley's had endeavoured to cover their tracks when they had run.

He turned his thoughts to the boy's future and snorted. The damn prophecy didn't foresee this happening, he thought sardonically, how is the boy supposed to defeat the Dark Lord if he can't damn well see him. Severus started tapping the arm of his chair. Blindness combined with the boy's obviously poor mental state at the end of the school year was going to make him very difficult to deal with. A sneer wafted over his face; the boy will be wallowing in self-pity, he thought, and that damn werewolf will probably join in with him. The boy doesn't need coddling; he will need to be provoked, to be goaded into moving and learning how to deal with his disability. Severus smiled smugly, it seemed that he would be best suited for that role. An

opportunity to rile Potter for a good cause; an unusual circumstance but one he would undoubtedly enjoy. While he had sympathy for the boy, for no one deserved what had been done to him, it was sympathy only, not pity. Pity would be dangerous, it would encourage the boy to hide; sympathy was acceptable, not that he would allow the boy to hear that sympathy.

Severus nodded in satisfaction and rose to get dressed. He still had no answers as to what was to be done about teaching a blind boy magic but he rather thought, from the look on his face last night, that Albus had something up his sleeve.

Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape and Poppy Pomfrey all found themselves back in the hospital wing a couple of hours later. Remus did not seem to have moved from where Poppy had left him. Poppy fussed about in her office to keep herself busy, with one ear cocked towards the ward. Dumbledore settled himself on the edge of Harry's bed while Snape clasped his hands behind his back and stood next to the Headmaster. And they waited.

The first indication that Harry was finally regaining consciousness was a slight increase in his rate of breathing. His mouth opened slightly and he hesitantly licked his lips.

Remus leaned forward slightly. "Harry? Can you hear me? It's Remus," he asked quietly.

Harry licked his lips again. "R...Remus?" he whispered. "W...where am I?"

Remus closed his eyes in relief and gently squeezed the boy's hand as Poppy hurried out from her office to join them. "You're at Hogwarts, Harry, in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey is here, so are Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape."

Harry gave a slight inclination of his head to indicate that he had heard and he fell silent and breathed deeply for a minute. He licked his lips again and whispered, "Water?"

"Of course," Remus said with a smile and picked up the glass of water sitting on the bedside table. He conjured a bendable straw in the glass and held the end of the straw to Harry's lips. Harry sucked down the water eagerly. When he indicated that he was finished, Remus put the glass back on the table and leaned forward again.

"Harry? Do you feel like talking a bit more?"

Harry swallowed and nodded, "Remus? Why is it so dark?"

A thick silence fell and the four adults exchanged looks. Remus took a deep breath and spoke, "Your...your eyes were hurt, Harry. They've been bandaged." He hesitated for a second. "Do you remember how that happened?"

Harry gasped and was silent and then he began to shake. He drew in a long shuddering breath and his grip on Remus' hand tightened. Remus tightened his grip in return to reassure Harry and began to stroke his hair.

"It's alright, Harry," he said soothingly. "It's okay. You can tell us. Please."

Harry swallowed and drew in another deep breath, the shaking subsiding a little. He chewed on his bottom lip and then let it go with a hiss, having found the healing splits. He hesitated for a moment longer and then began to whisper. The four adults leaned in and listened intently.

"The Dursley's were pretty good for the first week of the holidays. I think Moody really scared them with what he said. They pretty much left me alone and they didn't make me do any chores. I guess I helped a bit; I stayed in my room a lot. I...I wanted to think. About..." Harry hesitated a long moment and when he spoke again his voice was choked. "S...Sirius." Remus gave his hand an extra squeeze in understanding and Harry took a deep, shuddering breath. When he continued his whispered voice was back to normal. "Something happened on the Monday of the second week of holidays. I think something bad happened at Uncle Vernon's work. He came home that night in a pretty foul mood. He snapped at Aunt Petunia and Dudley and yelled at me. I went straight back to my room after dinner as I didn't want to provoke him any further and he really only has to look at me to get provoked. I guess that continued for the rest of the week except Uncle Vernon's temper just kept getting worse and worse."

"Things came to a head on Saturday night. After dinner I went back to my room but Dudley went out with his gang; they usually beat up any little kids who are stupid enough to get in their way. Something must have gone wrong for him this time 'cause he was brought back by the police. They said that he hadn't been charged yet but that he may be the next day after the kid who he had been beating up gave her statement. I guess that was his big mistake; he was beating up a girl. Uncle Vernon started screaming at him, saying he was a disgrace to the family, that they didn't send him to such a prestigious school as Smeltings so that he could go and get himself into trouble with the police, that if he continued he'd end up at St Brutus' along with me." Harry paused. "That's where Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia say that I go; St Brutus' School for Incurably Criminal Boys. They think it's better than saying I go to Hogwarts." Harry gave a breathy laugh then winced and continued. "Then things just kind of got out of control. Pig arrived with a letter from Ron but he obviously got mixed up and flew in the kitchen window. Uncle Vernon went berserk. He doesn't like owls in the house at the best of times and Pig's antics are enough to annoy anybody. He yelled at me to get down there and started yelling at Pig to get out. I guess Pig listened to him as I saw him flying out the window just as I got there. Uncle Vernon was...well, I've never seen him so angry. He scared the hell out of me. He started screaming at me about owls in the house and about me being a freak and all sorts of other stuff. He said he'd fix me and he grabbed the back of my shirt and dragged me upstairs to my room. He started ranting again and then, before I could do anything, he opened Hedwig's cage, grabbed her and broke her neck."

Harry was forced to stop here as he gasped out strangled sobs of loss and pain and clutched at his ribs. Remus stroked his hair and made soothing sounds as tears soaked into the bandages covering his eyes. He slowly got himself under control and continued, his voice sounding young and bewildered. "I...I don't know why he did it! Hedwig never did anything to him!" Harry stumbled to a stop again and struggled to get himself under control.

"I lost my temper and started yelling at him. I shouldn't have, it was really the wrong thing to do. His face turned a really weird shade of purple and he punched me. He grabbed me by the back of the shirt again and dragged me back into the kitchen and hit me again. Aunt Petunia and Dudley weren't there anymore. I don't know where they went. I pushed away from him and he completely lost it. I'd pushed him back against the bench and he grabbed a glass that Aunt Petunia had left there. It was cracked because Uncle Vernon had slammed it down on the table too hard during dinner. I didn't know what he was going to do with it but I didn't expect him to throw it at me. It hit my glasses and shattered and my glasses shattered too. They'd been getting pretty fragile in the last couple of years what with everything that's happened to me." Harry stopped again, breathing heavily, swallowed hard and then continued. It was clear he wished to get through this as quickly as he could.

"It hurt so much. My eyes just burned and I could feel the blood on my face. I couldn't open my eyes so I didn't see Uncle Vernon come at me. He started hitting me and when I fell to the floor, he started kicking as well. I think I started screaming and then I blacked out." He stopped again and thought hard. "That's all I remember, Remus, until I woke up here."

Harry relaxed back into the pillow and gestured towards the bedside table. Remus, correctly interpreting the gesture even through his shock, picked up the glass of water and let Harry drink. The remaining adults stared at each other in disbelief. They were still frozen in shock when Harry handed the glass back to Remus.

"Remus," he asked hesitantly, "are...are my eyes going to be okay?"

Remus nearly dropped the glass on the bedside table and shot a look towards the Headmaster. Dumbledore patted Harry's feet through the blanket and said to Remus, "Perhaps the truth would be best, Remus."

Harry stiffened a little as Remus sighed.

"You're right, Albus," he said, running a hand through his greying hair. "Harry, your eyes have been badly damaged. There was glass in them and though Madam Pomfrey managed to remove it all, the damage had already been done. There is a possibility that you may retain some sight but Harry, you must be prepared for the worst. It is far more likely that you will be blind." He stopped and watched Harry carefully; unsure as to how he would react.

Harry swallowed once but otherwise lay still, trembling slightly. Remus looked up at the others and could see that they too were concerned at Harry's so far passive response. They had expected anger and denial; to get nothing was unnerving.

Remus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry?" he asked. "Is everything alright?"

The bitter laugh surprised them all. "Alright, Remus? How could things be alright?" Harry whispered scornfully, angrily. "I am lying here thinking nothing could be worse than feeling like I have been beaten to a pulp and then you tell me I'm probably going to be blind. How can I possibly be alright? What am I supposed to do now? I can't use magic, I can't see what I'm supposed to be using magic against. And how am I supposed to confront Voldemort now? Unless that

bloody prophecy is wrong then I'd say Voldemort has just won, hasn't he? Leave me alone! All of you!"

By the end Harry's voice had risen to a hoarse shout and he collapsed back into his bed in exhaustion and pain. Remus opened his mouth to argue but was silenced by Dumbledore's raised hand. Dumbledore looked at Harry, his eyes full of sadness and worry and gestured for Snape and Lupin to join him in Poppy's office. Poppy hovered over Harry for a moment and went to join them but settled into the chair Remus had vacated at Dumbledore's nod. He shut the door after him and Remus, who had been pacing as best as he could in the small office, whirled to face him.

"Why did you shut me up?" Remus half-yelled.

"Because, my dear boy, it would not have done any good," Albus said calmly, "Harry is not in any sort of mood to listen to reason right now. He is in pain and has just had his entire life turned upside down."

"So we just let him wallow in self-pity then?" Snape queried sarcastically.

Dumbledore eyed him benignly. "Yes, Severus, for now we do. He must come to terms with this in his own way." He paused and gave Severus an amused little smile. "However, if his self-pity threatens to drag out for far too long, I'm sure we can count on you to snap our Mr Potter out of it. A pithy comment or two from yourself would no doubt bring him around."

Remus and Dumbledore chuckled as Snape glared at them and Remus glanced towards the closed door as though he could see through it into the ward. "Yes," he said with a weak laugh, "I'm sure Harry would leap to do things if you told him he couldn't."

"I'm glad I am of some use then," Snape snarled half-heartedly, knowing he had walked himself right into this one.

Remus sobered and shook his head. "Harry's right though, Albus. How the hell is he supposed to take on V...Voldemort if he is blind?"

Dumbledore smiled gently and the twinkle came back to his eye. "I believe I may have an answer to that," he said indulgently, "but it will have to wait until we know whether Harry has any sight left. My solution will only work if he is indeed blind. If he retains some sight, we may be able to work things the normal way."

Dumbledore would say no more on the subject and Remus turned to the other subject that had been worrying him all night.

"Albus," he said hesitantly, "what are we going to tell the Order and in particular, what are we going to tell Molly and the rest of the Weasleys and Hermione. You know Molly's been agitating to have Harry stay with them at some point this summer. Ron's going to know something's wrong when Pigwidgeon comes back to him with that letter undelivered. If the summer before Harry's second year is anything to go by, the Weasleys are liable to take some action."

"The Order will be told that Harry has been hurt and is now at Hogwarts. We will say nothing to them about his blindness," Dumbledore said. "It can serve no purpose other than to demoralise them. I hope that by the time we have to tell them of it, we can leaven it with good news. As to the Weasleys and Miss Granger, I shall speak with them today. Miss Granger has been staying at Headquarters with the Weasleys so we will not have to disrupt her holiday plans too much." Dumbledore held up his hands to forestall Remus' protests. "Peace, my boy, I will not allow them to come to Hogwarts just yet. We must give young Harry some time to get used to his new state of affairs but both you and I know we will not be able to hold them off forever."

Remus gave a weak smile as Snape muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like 'Gryffindors' and Dumbledore chuckled. "Now I suggest we leave here and give Harry some space," he said. "Remus, you need to get some sleep. Poppy will watch over Harry and Minerva will relieve her this afternoon. Severus will no doubt need to start restocking some of the supplies that were used on Harry and I must gird my loins to face the many Weasleys and the equally formidable Miss Granger."

Dumbledore ushered the two men out of the office and out of the hospital wing, all three of them sparing a glance towards the still form on the only occupied bed. Harry appeared to be asleep and truth be told it may even have been true.

Chapter 2

Ron was pacing up and down the kitchen of Number 12 Grimmauld Place in agitation while his mother, Ginny, Hermione, Fred and George looked on.

"Something's wrong, Mum, I know it," he was saying. "Pig wouldn't have brought the letter back unless he couldn't find Harry. Can't we go and find out?"

Molly, her eyes full of worry, tried to calm her youngest son. "I'm sure Dumbledore would have contacted us if there was something wrong," she said, not very convincingly. "Perhaps Pigwidgeon made some kind of mistake."

"He couldn't have, Mum," Ron burst out. "I know he's bloody annoying at times but he's always been reliable. Something's wrong."

"Ron's right, Mrs Weasley," Hermione said with a frown. "Pig's always made the delivery no matter who we've been sending things to. He even found Sirius without any problems."

The argument would have continued and Ron might have even been able to convince his mother to stage a rescue attempt had the fire not flared green at that point. Professor Dumbledore stepped out into the kitchen, much to the surprise of the current inhabitants.

"Albus!" Molly gasped in surprise and started to bustle around. "How wonderful to see you. I didn't know you were coming here today. Let me get you a cup of tea."

Dumbledore intercepted her before she could get too caught up in the flow.

"Molly," he said seriously, "I need to talk to you and your family and Miss Granger. Could you ask Arthur, Bill and Charlie to join us immediately?" He looked around the kitchen. "And perhaps we had best take this into the parlour."

Ron leapt forward and grabbed Dumbledore's arm. "Professor Dumbledore, does this have anything to do with Harry?" he asked urgently.

"Yes, it does Ron," he said sombrely, "but I would prefer to tell this tale only once."

Ron nodded and let go of Dumbledore's arm. He, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George left the kitchen and headed for the parlour. They were joined shortly afterwards by the rest of the Weasley family and Professor Dumbledore. The only absentee was Percy, who was still being obstinate. Dumbledore indicated for them all to sit and almost fell into a comfortable armchair. Those watching him were surprised to see him looking weary and almost defeated. He sighed deeply and looked up at the Weasleys and Hermione.

"I gather from young Ronald's reaction you have been worrying about Harry," he began.

Everyone in the room made various indications of agreement.

"Pig returned to me with a letter to Harry," Ron said. "He wouldn't do that unless he couldn't find Harry."

"Yes, I am aware of what has happened concerning your owl, Mr Weasley," Dumbledore replied. "Do not concern yourself about his efficiency. He was frightened off and was subsequently unable to deliver the letter to Harry. Last night the wards surrounding 4 Privet Drive indicated that there was something wrong with Harry. It was difficult to determine what exactly was wrong so I sent Remus Lupin and Professor Snape to find out. They found the house deserted and Harry badly injured."

There were various exclamations from the listeners and a few curses as well. Arthur Weasley frowned. "Was it Death Eaters, Albus? We had no indications at the Ministry last night of magic being used in that area."

"No, Arthur," Dumbledore said heavily, "it was not the work of Death Eaters. It appears that the Dursleys have been having some problems and things all culminated into a disaster last night. Vernon Dursley has been having some troubles at work that caused his temper to deteriorate alarmingly. To make matters worse, his son was brought home by the muggle police and was likely to be charged for assaulting a young girl. It appears that the mistaken arrival of

Ron's owl through the kitchen window instead of Harry's bedroom window was the spark that caused Vernon Dursley's deteriorating temper to explode."

Ron blanched and looked distressed. His mother immediately rose and sat next to him, giving him a hug and glaring at Dumbledore.

"Do not fret, Ron," Dumbledore soothed. "It was nothing that could have been foreseen. It is not your fault and I do not want you blaming yourself. Your owl could not have known the situation inside the house. While Mr Dursley has never been happy with owls in his house, he has never done more than yell at Harry prior to last night."

"But last night was different," Hermione said in trepidation. "Wasn't it, Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Granger," Dumbledore replied. "Mr Dursley's reaction was unfortunately quite extreme. It appears he killed Harry's owl."

"Oh no!" gasped Ginny. "Harry loved her!"

Dumbledore nodded and continued. "He then proceeded to beat Harry quite severely and left him in a cupboard under the stairs. It then appears that the Dursleys cleaned up any trace of what happened and left. No doubt they realised that Vernon had gone too far and this would not go unanswered. Severus and Remus found Harry in the cupboard and summoned Madam Pomfrey and myself. We have taken Harry to Hogwarts."

The Weasleys burst out into a myriad of exclamations, recriminations, curses and entreaties to be allowed to see Harry. In the midst of all this Hermione sat, solemnly staring at Professor Dumbledore. When the Weasleys finally quietened she spoke up.

"That's not all, is it sir? There's something else, something worse," she asked.

Dumbledore sagged into the chair and to everyone's horror two tears trickled down his face and into his beard.

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said sorrowfully, "you are quite correct. At one point during the events of last night, Mr Dursley threw a cracked glass at Harry's face. It impacted with his glasses and both shattered quite severely. Harry unfortunately did not have the time to either close or shield his eyes. There has been substantial damage. While it is possible that he may retain some sight; it is more likely that Harry is now blind."

The silence in the room was deafening and was only broken when Molly and Ginny began weeping quietly. Hermione seemed shocked into immobility and the remaining Weasleys stared white-faced at the Headmaster, quite unable to speak.

"Are you quite certain, Albus?" Arthur asked, shell-shocked.

"Poppy cannot be completely sure until the bandages come off but it does not look good. As I said the damage was quite extensive."

"Can we see him?" Molly asked tearfully.

"No, Molly," Dumbledore said gently. "Both Remus and I believe that Harry needs a little time to adjust to the fact that he will have little or no sight. I would like your family and Miss Granger to come to Hogwarts to be with Harry but I think it will have to wait for at least two weeks and it will be subject to Harry's wishes."

Molly nodded and Dumbledore rose to his feet. "I must return to Hogwarts," he said. "I must ask that you say nothing of this to anyone else. We cannot risk this information reaching Voldemort and even the least word said in the wrong company could do that."

Everyone in the room nodded and Dumbledore swept out of the room to return to the school.

The rest of the week passed uneventfully enough. Dumbledore notified both the Muggle authorities and the Ministry of Magic that Harry had been beaten quite severely and that the Dursleys had run. He did not mention the matter of Harry's probable blindness to either authority, believing that bridge would be crossed only when it became absolutely necessary. Harry had recovered from his outburst and had

apologised to the four adults who had been there. Afterwards he had lapsed into a silent state. He would answer questions when they were put to him but he would not volunteer any information.

A week after Harry had been brought to Hogwarts, the same four adults were again in the hospital wing. Harry looked much better physically; his bruising had faded significantly, his ribs and nose were fixed and the cuts on his face and lip had healed. All that remained was to determine how bad his eyes were. Poppy ordered Harry to keep his eyes closed and slowly unwrapped the bandages, taking care that they did not stick anywhere. After she had finished she lowered the lights in the ward and told Harry to open his eyes slowly.

He followed her orders and blinked a little to clear them. Poppy noticed the encrustations on them, washed them clear and stood back.

"Well, Harry?" Remus asked hopefully.

Harry swallowed hard and shook his head. "Nothing, it's just completely black."

Dumbledore looked grim and sat down on the edge of Harry's bed and patted his feet.

"Well, that's that then," he said calmly. "I had hoped that Poppy was wrong but now, Harry, we must make provisions for your education."

Harry looked stunned and directed his gaze in the general direction of the Headmaster. His green eyes were still bright but now stared blankly. "What?" Harry yelped and continued a little bitterly. "What education? How can I learn magic when I can't see the wand movements? Or see the results? Or follow the instructions on the board?"

Dumbledore patted Harry's feet again. "Calm down, Harry. I have given this much thought in the last week and I have contacted some old friends of mine. I believe I have the answer. It will not be easy, Harry, but if you apply yourself and listen to all your new teacher has to tell you then I have no doubts you will succeed."

Harry looked intrigued in spite of himself and Remus, Severus and Poppy were also curious.

"What kind of teacher?" Harry asked curiously.

"Tell me, Harry," Dumbledore said with a smile, "have you heard of the Guild of the Night?"

Harry laughed, to the delight of Remus, and said a little mischievously, "Isn't that a better question to ask Hermione, Professor Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore chuckled, pleased that in spite of Harry's severe disappointment he was still able to see the humour in situations. He had no doubt that Harry's moods would fluctuate for some time to come until he became fully adjusted to his new state but he found Harry's laughter was a good sign. Perhaps Severus' goading would not be required.

"I dare say that even the inestimable Miss Granger might not have the answer to this question," Dumbledore said, smiling. "The Guild of the Night is a very small, very secretive but very old association. They have largely been based in South East Asia but in the last few centuries they have spread into Asia proper and Europe. You see, Harry, while most of the Guild's instructors and some of the Council members are sighted, the majority of its members, the Night Warriors, as they are known, are all blind. In fact, it's something of a requirement."

Harry's sightless eyes widened and his mouth dropped open in surprise. His shock was mirrored by the adults in the room. Dumbledore chuckled at their expressions and patted Harry's feet.

"Long ago I became friends with a few members of the Guild of the Night and last week I sounded them out about the possibility of training you, should the worst come to the worst," he continued. "They were a little hesitant at first; they wanted you to come to them. But I persisted. I felt that you had had enough upheaval in your life and that it was important that you remain in familiar surroundings. They remained hesitant until I used my trump card." Dumbledore chuckled at the memory. "I mentioned Voldemort and his unusual interest in you." He held up a finger to maintain the silence of the others and continued. "Of course, I did not tell them of the prophecy or your part in it. That is your prerogative. But they did realise that Voldemort seems to be out to get you, Harry."

Harry snorted in wry amusement amid dry chuckles from Remus and a sardonic snort from Snape.

"It does seem that way, doesn't it?" Harry said dryly.

Dumbledore laughed. "So, they have agreed to train you and much to my delight they have decided to send my old friend, Master Nhean. He has been an instructor there for most of his life. His father was an instructor as well and brought his son up in the trade. He is one of the best, Harry!"

"Master Nhean," Harry savoured the name, almost seeming to roll it around his mouth. "Is that his first or last name? And where is he from?"

"Nhean is his first name. It means 'All-seeing' apparently. Guild instructors give up their family names when they join. The Guild becomes their family. And he is from Cambodia. He is not a young man but I warn you, Harry, do not underestimate him. He regularly runs some of the most gifted Warriors around the ring when he cares to," Dumbledore chuckled.

Harry nodded and his face fell. "But I still don't see how this is going to help."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "Would it help to know that Night Warriors use a combination of a variety of martial arts and magic to do their fighting?"

"Magic?" Harry exclaimed. "But how?" He stopped and thought furiously. "They use wandless magic, don't they?" he asked fiercely.

Dumbledore chuckled approvingly. "Yes they do, Harry. But that is not all they do. I can't tell you the exact details. They are remarkably secretive about that. But never doubt, Harry, that they are formidable warriors. Master Nhean has promised to train you exactly how the other Warriors are trained." Dumbledore clapped his hands, causing Harry to start a little. "Now, my dear boy, I shall leave you in the capable hands of Remus. You will have to leave the rest of your questions until Master Nhean gets here. He is the only one who will be able to answer them properly. He will be here in three days."

Dumbledore rose after patting Harry's feet again and gestured for Snape to join him. Madam Pomfrey bustled off to her office, leaving Remus alone with Harry.

"How are you doing, Harry?" Remus asked.

"Okay, I guess," Harry said, rubbing his forehead. "A little confused, kind of excited, a touch angry." He paused. "Remus, what's happening with the Dursleys?"

Remus was silent for a moment and sat down on the edge of the bed. "We're trying to find them, Harry. They ran after what happened that night. They cleaned up any evidence of what happened, put you in the cupboard under the stairs, packed quickly and left. Professor Dumbledore has informed both the Muggle and Wizarding authorities about what has happened and they are searching for them. They will be punished for what they did, Harry. By both sets of authorities."

Harry nodded and sat thinking for a while and then gasped and groped for Remus' arm. Remus reached for the fumbling hand and grasped it tightly.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Ron!" Harry gasped slightly inarticulately. "Pig was there with a message. He flew out of the window. What happened to him? Is he all right? Uncle Vernon didn't...didn't..." Harry's voice trailed off, unable to continue.

Remus squeezed Harry's hand comfortingly. "Pig's okay, Harry. I promise. He flew back to the Weasleys."

Harry shuddered and sighed in relief and then stiffened. "Er, Remus, Ron's going to freak out if Pig returns with an undelivered letter."

Remus laughed. "You have no idea. The Weasleys are staying at Number 12 Grimmauld Place for the summer and Hermione is with them. Ron was proposing a rescue mission; sure that something was

terribly wrong, when Dumbledore got there. He'd almost talked Molly into agreeing too." Remus paused. "Dumbledore told them what happened, Harry. All of it. He rather thought you might not want to go through it all over again when you saw them. He also wanted to forestall any precipitous action from Ron and Fred and George."

Harry nodded. "That's okay, Remus. I'm glad. I'm not sure if I could have told them. I'd rather just put it behind me really."

"Oh, good. I was afraid you'd be upset that Dumbledore did that. Harry, would you like for the Weasleys and Hermione to come here for part of the summer? Not immediately, of course, but maybe in a couple of weeks?"

Harry sat thinking for a while and finally nodded. "The Weasleys are the closest thing to a family I've got apart from you and Hermione and Ron are my best friends." He paused and gave a half-smile. "Besides I think I could do with a dose of Masters Gred and Forge."

Remus chuckled, touched that Harry considered him almost family. "They are quite talented," he agreed. "Now onto the first order for the day. Up, Harry, up! Time to get your butt out of bed."

Harry laughed. "I'd love to. It's pretty boring here." He hesitated and looked a little fearful. "You won't leave me, will you?"

Remus pulled the sheets and blankets back and helped Harry out of bed and into a dressing gown. He steadied Harry and placed both

hands on his shoulders. "I'm not going anywhere, Harry, but you have to learn to get around."

Harry shook his head in despair. "How?" he asked plaintively and bitterly.

"Easy," Remus replied. "You're in the hospital wing and you've been here before. Think, Harry, and concentrate. You know what's in the room and you know more or less where it is. Now, you are standing next to your bed, facing the bed next to yours. How would you get out of the room, in detail?"

Harry stood thinking carefully and then said slowly, "I'd turn right towards the end of my bed and walk until my hand hit the rail at the end of the bed. Then I'd turn left and walk slowly along the end of the beds, making sure I grabbed the rail on the end of each one until I got to the wall at the end of the room. Then I'd turn right and follow the wall until I got to the door. I'd be facing the door so I would just have to reach out and find the door handle, turn it and walk out."

"Congratulations! Exactly right. Now, can you do it? I'll be right here, Harry. I won't leave you and I'll stop you and help you if you make any mistakes." Remus paused and said with a voice full of mirth, "And Harry? If you make it all the way to the Great Hall, Dobby has put together veritable feast for you. He's been very worried and he's been making all your favourite dishes every day."

Harry laughed a little nervously and turned towards the end of his bed. His progress was slow and hesitant but every time he got scared and wanted to stop he would think out exactly where he was in the room

and how he could get to the door and would continue, with Remus' soft reassurances echoing in his ears. After a painfully long time his groping hand found the handle of the door and he turned in the direction of Remus' voice, his face bright with a triumphant smile.

"Well done, Harry," Remus said. "Now, do you think you can find the Great Hall?"

Harry thought hard, tracing the route from the hospital wing to the Great Hall in his mind. There were a few places that he wasn't entirely sure that he had the directions correct but he was determined to try. If nothing else, he was definitely in the mood for some of Dobby's cooking. He nodded to Remus and opened the door.

Remus followed along behind Harry and watched his groping progress with a mix of pride and anguish. He was proud that Harry seemed to be adjusting to his blindness and had had the courage to try this navigation so early in his recovery. He had been fully prepared to lead Harry around for a few days until he was ready to try on his own and perhaps Harry might have let him, had he been anywhere other than Hogwarts. Remus supposed that Harry, Ron and Hermione had been all over the castle, for purposes both legitimate and otherwise, and Harry felt comfortable enough in finding his way. His anguish came from a tremendous guilt that he had not done more to protect Harry. James and Sirius had been his first and best friends and he felt that he had let them down. The anguish also came from a terrible despair. Despite Dumbledore's words, Remus couldn't see how Harry could possibly face Voldemort. He sighed quietly and continued trailing Harry, speaking his soft words of encouragement.

The Entrance Hall provided Harry with his first major setback. He had taken three steps into the Hall before he realised where he was and the sudden lack of a guiding wall brought him to a stop. He froze, trembling, and stammered, "R...Remus?"

Remus came up behind him and placed his hands on Harry's shoulders. "It's alright, Harry. You're in the Entrance Hall. Take a few deep breaths and think back to all the times you've been in here." Harry gulped and followed Remus' instructions. "Now," Remus continued, "you've come from the hospital wing and you're going to the Great Hall. Which direction do you need to face?"

Harry drew in a few more deep breaths, his forehead scrunched in thought. Finally his face cleared and he turned towards the doors to the Great Hall. Remus removed his hands from Harry's shoulders and the two of them resumed their halting progress. About three-quarters of the way across, Harry brought his hands up and started lightly waving them in front of himself. He was rewarded when his hands brushed the wall beside the doors to the Great Hall. He stopped and thought again and groped a little further left. When his hands found the wood of the doors he breathed an almost silent "Hah". He felt his way to the middle of the doors and pushed them open.

Again he paused, trying to remember the layout of the Great Hall.

Remus came up behind him again. "They've removed all the House tables, Harry, seeing as it's the summer. There is just the one table set up in the middle. You can hear the teachers talking amongst themselves, can't you?"

Harry nodded, for now that he wasn't consumed in thought, he could indeed hear the soft murmur of voices coming from somewhere in front of him. He concentrated hard on the sound of voices and started towards them. As he neared the table, Professor McGonagall spoke up. "Harry, come and sit opposite me. We left two seats for you and Remus."

Harry grinned. He knew he was nearing one side of the table and McGonagall's voice came from further away than the voices he could hear murmuring in front of him so he knew he was on the right side of the table. He walked forward a little further and stopped behind the murmuring voices.

Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout, he identified and turned in the direction he had heard Professor McGonagall's voice come from. He stopped when he heard her say, "Right there, Harry," and fumbled into his seat. He sighed in relief and heard Remus chuckle as he sat down beside him.

"Well done, Harry," Remus said, his voice proud.

Harry grinned at him, his face full of relief. "I guess all those unauthorised excursions we've made were worth it," he laughed.

"Unauthorised excursions?" asked the silky voice of the Potions Master from across the table. "Are you making a confession, Mr Potter?"

Harry jumped and turned an innocent face towards Professor Snape. "Unauthorised excursions? Me?" he said, "You must have heard me wrong, Professor Snape."

Remus and a number of the teachers choked with laughter.

"Indeed, Mr Potter?" Snape said with amused sarcasm. "Then that wasn't you with your foot stuck in the staircase, dropping your golden egg in fourth year?"

"What?" Harry yelped, then recovered and shrugged innocently. "Fourth year, sir? Oh, I wouldn't think so, sir."

Snape snorted. "Of course not, Mr Potter," he drawled and relinquished the field of battle.

Harry swallowed a grin as the food appeared on the table and Remus gave him a nudge.

"Shall I tell you what's on the table so you can tell me if there is anything in particular that you want to eat? Or should I just put a bit of everything on a plate?" he asked.

"A bit of everything, thanks Remus," Harry said, sniffing the delicious aromas of the food. "I'm hungry!"

Remus chuckled as he loaded a plate for Harry and placed it in front of him. "There you go, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry said and fumbled for his fork and knife. He then came to a halt and put his cutlery down. He ducked his head a little and chewed on his lip.

"Everything alright, Harry?" Remus asked quietly in his ear.

"I...I can't see the food," he stammered. "Remus?"

Harry's face fell; he really didn't like the idea of fumbling with his food in front of all of his teachers. Particularly Professor Snape, who would probably view it as an opportunity for a little Harry-baiting.

Remus patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Harry. Let me tell you what's on your plate. A few chicken legs, some corn on the cob, chips and some bread and butter." He placed a napkin in Harry's hand and poured him a goblet of pumpkin juice, which he placed in front of his plate. "Here is your napkin and there is a goblet of pumpkin juice in front of your plate. I think your hands can do the rest," he laughed.

"Thank you, Remus," Harry said with relief as he felt for and picked up a chicken leg.

The rest of lunch went well apart from a small incident with some spilled pumpkin juice when Harry misjudged his distances. It was quickly cleaned up and dismissed by the teachers and Harry finished his lunch with a large piece of chocolate cake. He found his napkin, cleaned off his hands and face and leaned back in his chair in contentment.

He found it a little strange to be able to hear his teachers but not to be able to see them and began to concentrate on the various conversations.

"...so then he banked and damn near fell off his broom!"

"Goodness! How thrilling."

Madam Hooch and Professor Sinistra, he thought in satisfaction and concentrated on another conversation.

"...anyway I've moved the Venomous Tentacula away from them now but it's going to take an extra week before they are ready for harvesting."

"That is barely acceptable. I had not planned to start the potion for a few days. I suppose I can put it back a little further."

Professor Sprout and Professor Snape. Heh, Harry thought, nice to know he's rude to the teachers as well.

"...so if ya come up on 'em from behind, ya kin slip the bridle over their heads without 'em realising yer there. The Placement Charm ain't really needed."

"Well perhaps Hagrid, but I think the Placement Charm is safer."

"Indeed, Hagrid, Kelpies are very dangerous."

"Nah, nah, Professor. Look at the one up at Loch Ness. He's jest havin' a little fun. When was the las' time he killed anyone."

Heh, Harry laughed to himself, Hagrid's trying to convince Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall that Kelpies are safe and harmless.

Harry jumped when Remus voice whispered in his ear, "Having fun, Harry?"

He laughed quietly and nodded. "It's really strange being able to hear but not see," he said softly to Remus. "But I think my hearing's getting better."

"Well, as far as I understand, that's to be expected. Apparently your other senses will improve as well to compensate for the loss of your sight."

"Cool!" Harry said, intrigued rather in spite of himself.

Remus looked at him oddly and said a little hesitantly, "You seem to be taking this pretty well, Harry. Much better than I thought you would."

Harry ducked his head and then looked back up towards Remus.

"I know. I was pretty angry and upset at first but it occurred to me one night that there was no point being angry at any of you," Harry said quietly. "It was Uncle Vernon's fault. I can be angry at him and at Aunt Petunia and Dudley for not trying to stop him but it wasn't your fault or anyone else's here. You and Professor Snape rescued me; it'd be a bit ungrateful to get angry at you." Harry paused and his voice got even quieter. "Besides even being blind, I'm still better off than S...Sirius."

Remus put his arm around Harry's shoulders and gave him a quick squeeze in understanding. "Yes," he sighed heavily. "I told myself something along those lines at the last full moon."

Harry leaned into Remus and the two sat like that for a moment before Harry remembered something and sat up. He turned towards where he thought Professor Snape was sitting.

"Professor Snape?" he asked a little hesitantly.

"Yes, Potter?" Snape replied coolly.

Harry swallowed. "I...I wanted to thank you for going with Remus to rescue me," he stammered.

There was a long silence from the other side of the table. "You're welcome," Snape replied in a strangely neutral tone.

Harry hesitated again and then took a deep breath. "Professor Snape? Would you be willing to teach me Occlumency again?" he asked quickly.

Silence fell at the table and Snape raised an eyebrow in question at Professor Dumbledore.

"Are you having visions again, Harry?" Remus asked anxiously before the Headmaster could say anything.

Harry frowned. "Well, no, not visions as such. It's kind of hard to explain. It's a little weird, it's sort of like I'm picking up stray feelings or thoughts and sometimes my dreams are really strange. Like they're not really mine. I think its coming from Vol...You-Know-Who but I'm not sure. It's only been happening the last couple of days." Harry grimaced. "And I could really do without it right now."

"You had some troubles with Professor Snape during the last school year," Dumbledore said gravely, "that made it difficult for you to work with him. Has that changed at all?"

Harry squirmed in his seat, suddenly realising that all the teachers were listening. "Yes, Professor," he said, unwilling to elaborate at this point.

Dumbledore waited for a moment to see whether Harry was going to continue and then raised an eyebrow at Professor Snape.

Snape stared at Harry for a long moment with an indecipherable expression on his face. "Very well, Potter, but do not waste them this time," he snapped.

Harry nodded in relief while Remus shot a glare at Snape.

Harry sagged back into his seat and groped for Remus' arm. "Remus, can we go back to the hospital wing? I'm a little tired."

"Of course, Harry," Remus said and leapt to his feet. He pulled back Harry's chair and he got carefully to his feet. "Alright, do you remember how to get back to the hospital wing?"

Harry gave a tired grin. "Yep," he said with confidence as he turned and slowly but surely made his way out of the Great Hall.

Chapter 3

The next morning Harry was making his slow way down to the dungeons. Snape had sent word that the mornings would be the best time for his Occlumency lessons during the summer. He was on his own this time; Remus had offered to come with him but Harry had wanted to try this one on his own. He'd been down to the dungeons so many times in the past five years that he felt he wouldn't have any problems. Remus had reluctantly agreed and had given him a small amulet to wear. If he ever got lost he could hold it and say 'Invenio' and Remus would be able to find him. He felt a surge of triumph as his hand brushed the door to the dungeons and he knocked loudly on it.

"Come," he heard Snape say from behind the door. He pushed it open and stood on the threshold for a minute so that he could remember the layout of the room. He then made his way to the front of the classroom and stopped when his hand hit Professor Snape's desk.

Snape noticed that Harry's movements were much smoother and more assured today and came around to the front of his desk. He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and was grimly amused when Harry jumped at the contact.

"It will be easier if we are both seated for this," he said as he steered Harry over to the front row of desks and allowed him to fumble his way into a seat. "We will be doing these lessons somewhat differently now as it is no longer possible to approach you by making eye contact and you cannot use your wand."

Harry started. "I can't be attacked by that kind of Legilimency anymore? Er, sir."

"No, Potter, it requires conscious eye contact by both parties. I shall use a different type. It is more subtle and is harder to defend against. You cannot defend against it by casting a spell, you must either deny me access to your mind completely or cast me out if I am in there," Snape replied. "Shall we begin?"

"Er, yes, sir," Harry said a little nervously and waited. At first it appeared that nothing was happening and then he felt something odd in his mind. It was as though someone was sneaking in and rummaging around in his head. Snape was right, this was much more subtle. Harry tried to locate Snape inside his mind. It was very difficult; every time he thought he had him, he'd slip away into another part of his mind. Very shortly, Harry was sweating profusely. He felt the presence disappear from his mind.

"Stop," Snape ordered after about half an hour and placed a glass of water in his hand. "Drink this and rest. Then we will try again." As Harry gratefully drank the water down, Snape continued. "You have the right idea, Potter, you are just too slow. Don't wait to see what I am doing. I am attacking your mind, rush me and throw me out. Manners are not necessary." Snape paused and his voice became silkily insulting. "Unless you would prefer the Dark Lord to know all your weaknesses."

Harry flushed and banged the glass down on the desk. He winced and one hand rose involuntarily towards his eyes and he shivered. Snape watched this with narrowed eyes and he recalled how the boy had been blinded.

"Ready, Potter?" he snapped.

Harry jerked and shook his head. "Yes, sir!" he gasped and ripped his mind away from the memories of what had happened to him. Again he felt that odd sensation in his mind. This time he did not wait and rushed towards the presence but it slipped away from him at the last moment. Harry drew back and located the presence again. He tried rushing it again but it slipped away from him. He frowned and drew back for a moment. When he located the presence again, he tried something a little different. Instead of just rushing it this time, he tried to circle around and rush up on the presence from behind. He wasn't sure how he knew how to do this; it almost seemed to be instinctive. This time his attack was more successful. He managed to grasp the presence for a moment before it convulsed and broke free. It faded from his mind again and he collapsed back into his chair.

"Better, Potter, but you are still too slow," he heard Snape saying. He wiped his face with one hand as Snape continued. "That is enough for today. Be back here at the same time tomorrow and remember to clear your mind every night."

Harry nodded and stood, picturing the Potions classroom in his mind so he knew which way to go. He paused halfway out of the room. "Professor?"

"Yes, Potter?" Snape replied impatiently.

"How could I have known how to do that in my mind? Is it something instinctive?" Harry asked.

"Knowing that someone is in your mind is instinctive, yes," Snape replied neutrally, "but tracking and repelling the intruding mind is something that can only be honed by practicing extensively." Snape paused. "Your effort today was acceptable. You were able to locate my presence in your second attempt but you did not grasp it sufficiently tightly and you were not able to expel me. You will find it easier as you continue to practice."

"Oh, okay," said Harry, "thank you, sir." He turned and made his way out of the classroom, leaving a somewhat confused Potions Master behind him.

When he was about halfway up the corridor he broke out in a grin. He could tell as he left that Professor Snape had been confused and was enjoying throwing him off balance. He had made a conscious decision that he was going to be polite and civil to Snape, no matter what it cost him. He was still haunted by dreams of Sirius falling through the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. He had had plenty of time in the week he had been confined to bed with his eyes bandaged to think about everything that had happened on 'That Day' as he had come to refer to it.

He still didn't like Snape that much but he had realised that he had been a bit unfair to him. He had allowed himself to forget that Malfoy and his cronies had also been in the room when he had yelled out to Snape about Sirius. Junior Death Eaters, Harry thought with a snort. Snape had reacted exactly how he had to react. Malfoy and the others believed that Snape was still a loyal Death Eater; if he had broken cover to help Harry he would have been signing his own

death warrant, not to mention robbing the Order of much needed information.

He had also realised that it wasn't his fault that Sirius had died. That had been the result of a chain of events that no-one could have predicted. But it was his fault that they had all ended up there; he had stopped his Occlumency lessons and Voldemort had been able to show him that false vision. He was determined that wouldn't happen again and that meant mastering Occlumency. And if that meant being polite to Snape then so be it.

Dumbledore had been pleased with his attitude when he had spoken to him towards the end of that interminable week. He had also taken the opportunity to apologise to the Headmaster for his behaviour in his office. They had spoken at some length and had come to an agreement. Dumbledore would no longer keep him out of the loop. Harry had come up with a winning argument when he had mentioned that according to the Prophecy he was supposed to defeat Voldemort and that it would be especially difficult if he didn't have the information he needed to do it and any information could be the thing that was crucial. They had also agreed that if Dumbledore had some information that he didn't want to tell Harry just yet and Harry asked about it, he would give the reasons for not telling. That way, even if Harry didn't like or agree with those reasons, at least he knew what they were. Harry had told Dumbledore how he felt; that if he had known why Voldemort kept coming after him maybe he would have made some different decisions.

He was making his way along the wall of the Entrance Hall to the corridor that would take him back to the hospital wing when he heard the outer doors open. He heard whoever it was that had entered put down some bags and walk over to him.

"Hello, Harry," said an unfamiliar, accented voice. "My name is Master Nhean. I believe that Professor Dumbledore will have spoken to you about me."

Harry gaped and stammered out a reply. "Er, hi, sir! Um, welcome to Hogwarts." He stopped, blushed a little and gathered his thoughts. "Er, sorry about that Master Nhean. We weren't expecting you for another couple of days."

Master Nhean laughed. "I know, that was the original plan but I found that I was able to wrap up my affairs in Cambodia much quicker than I thought I would. So I thought, rather than wait, I would come on as soon as I could."

Harry gave a small shake of his head. He thought Master Nhean's accent was fascinating and found it very soothing and almost hypnotic. "Um, can I take you to Professor Dumbledore's office?" he asked.

"You would be able to find your way there? I understood that your blinding was very recent?" Master Nhean asked in surprise.

"It was," Harry said, "but I've been wandering around the halls of Hogwarts for five years now. Remus came up with the idea of me picturing the route to where I want to go. I've been here so long that I know where everything is, I just have to think things through carefully now." Harry paused and gave a small laugh. "Mind you, the shifting staircases will probably end up being a minor problem though when I start using them again."

Master Nhean looked both intrigued and approving and it came through, much to Harry's pleasure, in his voice. "That was well done! And quite clever of this Remus of yours. Well then, lead on, Harry."

Harry grinned and carefully thought out the way to Dumbledore's office. He had just turned in the direction he needed to go when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Harry," said Master Nhean, "I step very lightly at times and I wanted to make sure you knew that I was indeed following you."

Harry nodded in understanding and started walking. When they got out of the Entrance Hall, he found out what Master Nhean meant by stepping lightly. He could hardly hear him and in some areas if he hadn't had Master Nhean's hand on his shoulder he would have thought he wasn't being followed at all. Master Nhean was also very good about not distracting him from remembering the route he had to take and in fairly short order he felt the shape of the gargoyle that guarded the Headmaster's office under his hands.

"Fizzing Whizbees," he said and took Master Nhean up the circular staircase. At the top he knocked on the door and opened it at Dumbledore's "Come in, Harry."

Dumbledore looked up when Harry walked in and was surprised to see Master Nhean.

"Nhean! What a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect you for a couple of days," he said.

"I know, Albus," Nhean chuckled. "I found myself ready early and rather than wait I thought an early start with young Harry here might be worthwhile. I was surprised to find him in the Entrance Hall and impressed when he offered to lead me here."

"Harry has an excellent knowledge of Hogwarts and its many secrets," Dumbledore said blandly as Harry grinned mischievously.

"Indeed?" Nhean replied, equally blandly, making a note to himself to ask Harry about how he knew these things. From the look on the young man's face, it would probably make interesting and amusing hearing.

Dumbledore clapped his hands. "Now, Nhean, you and I have much to talk about. Do you wish Harry to remain?"

Nhean considered things for a moment. "No, he and I will be having a long conversation and I think it best not to mix conversations. Is that alright, Harry?"

"Um, yes, that's fine," Harry replied

"Good," Nhean said, "but before you go, would you answer a question for me?" Harry nodded. "You were clearly coming from somewhere when I arrived, was this from anything in particular or was it just random rambling?"

Harry hesitated and looked towards Professor Dumbledore.

"It's alright, Harry. Any part of your education can be discussed with Master Nhean as he will now be in charge of it," Dumbledore said reassuringly.

"Okay," Harry said, "I was coming back from my Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape."

"Occlumency lessons?" Nhean said curiously. "Interesting. Well, I think any discussion of that will come later, Harry. If we start now, we'll still be going hours from now and Professor Dumbledore would be most impatient."

Both Harry and the Headmaster laughed at that and Harry made his way out of the room. The two men waited until they heard him going down the stairs then Dunbledore ushered his old friend into a chair by the fire and took the chair opposite. He summoned a house elf and ordered tea for both of them.

"Well, welcome to Hogwarts, Nhean," he said, "and I must say how relieved I am to see you here and early at that!"

He paused when the house elf returned and poured the tea. When the tiny creature disappeared, he leaned back in his chair. Master Nhean eyed his old friend and took in every detail.

"Now, Albus," Nhean said, "tell me everything about young Harry that you think I need to know. This situation quite obviously has you severely troubled."

Dumbledore sighed and stared into his tea. "Yes, Nhean, it does. I do not know what ongoing effect this is going to have however," he said almost absently and then took a deep breath. "I believe I will start at the beginning, Nhean. It is important you understand why I asked for the concessions I did as much as understanding what has happened to Harry."

Nhean nodded and gestured for Dumbledore to continue.

"Harry is the son of James and Lily Potter, who were also students here at Hogwarts. A year or so before Harry was born a prophecy was made. Basically it said that the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord Voldemort, whom I always knew as Tom Riddle, would be born at the end of July, that the parents would have defied Tom three times and that Tom himself would mark this child as his equal. In the end it could have been one of two children, it was Tom himself that chose Harry. We had placed Harry and his parents in protection using the Fidelius charm."

Dumbledore paused at this point and considered what to say. "James had three great friends while at school. Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew and Sirius Black. The four called themselves the Marauders and were quite the little troublemakers. James and Sirius were as close as brothers and when the Fidelius charm was performed everyone naturally assumed that Sirius was the Secret Keeper. Unbeknownst to us all, they had changed at the last minute. Peter was made the Secret Keeper; the theory being he would be the least suspect, Tom would spend all his time trying to get his hands on Sirius and James, Lily and Harry would be safe. Unfortunately what no-one knew at that time was that Peter had already defected and was now a follower of Tom's. He betrayed James and Lily and led Tom straight to where they were hiding. Tom killed both James and Lily and attempted to kill Harry."

"Attempted," said Nhean. "That implies he failed. Quite remarkable if he was using Avada Kedavra as I assume he was?"

"Yes," Dumbledore confirmed, "He failed because Lily chose to die for her son. It allowed for a rather powerful form of blood magic to occur. That blood magic caused Tom's spell to rebound. It didn't kill him but it did destroy his physical body temporarily. It was, of course, assumed that Sirius had betrayed them and, to my shame, I too had been taken in. He was quickly arrested after he had appeared to murder Peter and several muggles. This was why I had one of my associates rescue Harry from the remains of the house and bring him to his only living relatives. His mother's sister and her husband. They were the only choice remaining with the apparent betrayal of his godfather. Yes, Sirius was Harry's godfather. There was also the benefit of Petunia being a blood relative. I did not believe that Tom was dead; I knew that one day he would return and if Harry was living with a blood relative, some very powerful protective wards could be put in place."

"So Harry grew up with his relatives and we in the wizarding world had very little contact with him. I felt that this was for the best. Harry was famous. The Boy-Who-Lived. I wished for him to grow up away from that; to grow up as normally as possible. What I did not know was that Harry was mistreated by his relatives. Oh, not beaten, but neglected and left unloved and unwanted." Dumbledore sighed sadly. "Arabella Figg, whom I set to watch over Harry as best she could, did not report this to me. She did tell me that Petunia favoured her son over Harry but as far as she could tell the boy was not being badly mistreated. She was unable to get too close to the Dursleys so she was not able to really see how the boy was being treated."

"So the boy arrived at Hogwarts not as happy or as well-looking after as I would have liked. But he was a normal, unspoiled boy. He had a knack for making good friends and was clearly enjoying his time here at Hogwarts. But every summer I have sent him back to his relatives to renew the protective wards. He has had some eventful years here, Nhean, though perhaps you should ask him about those. I daresay I have only half the story on many of the events he has been through. But last year was a touch different. There was a considerable amount of Ministry interference here at Hogwarts that I was unable to combat. Added to that was Harry's increasing vulnerability to Tom. No doubt you noticed the scar on his forehead. That scar symbolises the link that was somehow established between Tom and Harry when he was a baby. For some time Harry could feel Tom's emotions when they were strong or he was close. But last year, with the strengthening of Tom and particularly after his re-embodiment, Harry was having visions where he was seeing things from Tom's point of view. You see, Tom has only ever known the first part of the prophecy and the only record of it, other than the one in my head, is held in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry."

"Tom spent much of the year trying to lure Harry to the Ministry so that he could use him to get the Prophecy and he finally succeeded at the end of the school year. I was not here; I had been forced to flee by the representative of the Ministry who was foisted on us. Tom sent

a vision of Sirius being tortured in the Department of Mysteries. Harry and a number of his friends went to the Ministry to rescue him."

"But the vision was false," Nhean said matter-of-factly.

"Yes," Dumbledore replied sadly. "Professor Snape was able to get word to Sirius and a number of other members of the Order and we went to the Ministry to rescue Harry and his friends from the Death Eaters." Dumbledore chuckled sadly at the memory. "Not that we were needed that greatly. Harry and his friends were doing extremely well on their own. But during the fracas, Sirius died; he fell through the Veil that is housed in the Department of Mysteries. Harry and Sirius had met during Harry's third year. He found out the truth of what had happened and over the last couple of years had formed a strong bond with Sirius. Sirius' death devastated him but also protected him as well. Tom and I had a little confrontation at the Ministry. Tom took over Harry's mind but was driven out by his feelings for his godfather. Tom cannot bear to be in close contact with such strong positive emotions."

"Again I sent him back to his relatives, Nhean, though I regret that I did not keep a closer eye on him. It appears that his Uncle came upon hard times at work. From what we have discovered so far, Vernon Dursley was accused of embezzlement, theft and fraud, though we are unsure if the accusations are true. He was certainly placed under great pressure. That was added to by a number of harassment claims that were filed against him. It was apparently started by a young woman who was working for him and then 3 others were filed shortly afterwards. Apparently they gained courage after the young woman complained. From what Harry has said, this went on for a week without Vernon saying anything at home. Things were compounded again when on the Saturday night, Vernon's son was brought home by the police with strong indications he would be charged with assaulting a young girl the next day. The arrival of the

owl of Harry's friend, Ron, seemed to be the final straw for Vernon. He beat Harry quite severely and threw a cracked glass at Harry's face. The glass shattered along with Harry's glasses and Harry did not have time to close his eyes. The Dursleys have run and we are endeavouring to find them."

A long silence fell as Nhean tilted his head back in thought. "Hmm, I have heard of reactions like that before." At Dumbledore's querying glance, Nhean elaborated. "I know you are angry at this Vernon Dursley, Albus, but I believe he was not entirely responsible for his own actions. Great stress, such as what Vernon Dursley was subjected to, can lead to the situation where, with a trigger event, the sufferer can temporarily lose hold of their sanity. That is probably why they ran. Although the Dursleys clearly did not like Harry, they had never harmed him physically before. Vernon Dursley was probably afraid of his own reaction as much he was of yours."

Dumbledore nodded and his face cleared a little. "Yes, there is a great deal of sense in that. It will not stop us from punishing him for what he did but we will take it into account."

"You may wish to speak to some Muggle counsellors," Nhean suggested, "as they will be able to give you better information about how and why this can happen." He stopped and cocked his head slightly to one side as he thought. "Admittedly his reaction was quite extreme but if, as you say, he had a strong dislike for Harry beforehand, that may explain why things went so terribly wrong."

"Indeed," Dumbledore acknowledged, "but truth be told, I am more concerned with Harry at this point in time. Nhean, you have dealt with those who have been suddenly blinded before. Are Harry's reactions

normal? Is there something we should be watching for?" Dumbledore leaned forward, a look of grave concern on his face.

Nhean sipped his tea as he contemplated what he had seen of the boy. "It's not unusual, no. From what you told the Council, he had a week of contemplating this outcome and was probably able to prepare himself somewhat for it. Oh Albus, don't worry. He will have days where he seems perfectly adjusted to his new life and he will have days where the bitterness and anger will get the better of him. I have known men and women who have been blind for over forty years who still have those good days and bad days." He put his teacup down and laced his fingers together. "The important thing that you and all those that care for Harry must do is to constantly remind him that he is loved. That his being blind does not change your feelings one iota. And while you do that, I shall watch him to ensure all is well."

Dumbledore smiled and his eyes twinkled. "I do not think that will be a problem. It has been all I can do to keep the Weasleys and Miss Granger from coming to Hogwarts. They are desperately worried about him."

"Some of those good friends of his, I assume," Nhean said.

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. "Ronald Weasley was his first friend. They met on the Hogwarts Express. The two of them became friends with Miss Hermione Granger after a run-in with a troll which you must ask them about. I believe you will enjoy the story. Arthur and Molly took Harry into their home and truly do treat him as though he were their son." Dumbledore paused. "If I had not been so sure that Tom would return and that the need to protect Harry was paramount, I believe I would have asked Arthur and Molly to take in Harry after his

parents were killed. He could not have grown up with a better family." Dumbledore shook off the melancholy mood that was threatening to overtake him. "Ron and Hermione, along with Arthur and Molly's youngest child, Ginny, were among those who accompanied Harry to the Department of Mysteries."

Nhean cocked an interested eyebrow. "Indeed? And who were the others?"

"Miss Luna Lovegood and Mr Neville Longbottom." Dumbledore paused, "Mr Longbottom was the other boy I mentioned, whom the prophecy could have been about. Harry knows of this but I believe that Mr Longbottom does not."

Nhean nodded and thought for a moment. "Do you think that Miss Lovegood and Mr Longbottom would be willing to come to Hogwarts as well? Would Harry mind?"

"I do not think that either the Longbottoms or Mr Lovegood would mind," Dumbledore said. "As for Harry, we will have to ask him. Why do you ask?"

"It seems to me that Harry and these fellow students who went with him formed a rather formidable fighting group," Nhean said, "and I think I will take advantage of this. I will have to train him to work in concert with others and they will do perfectly. I'll ask Harry myself when I speak with him. And speaking of that, where is Harry staying at the moment? I think he and I might have lunch and spend this afternoon chatting. Then we can get started tomorrow."

Dumbledore rose. "Harry is staying in the hospital wing for the moment. I'll take you down there, my friend, and I will contact the Longbottoms and Mr Lovegood about Neville and Luna."

He waved Nhean out through his office door and the two men walked through the corridors of Hogwarts towards the hospital wing. They were a study in contrasts. The Headmaster was tall, with long, white hair and beard and piercingly blue eyes, dressed in elaborate robes. Master Nhean was a small man with almost caramel-coloured skin and short, cropped black hair and he wore very plain, buff coloured robes. The only thing they had in common on the outside was an air of great wisdom. They were chatting away as they entered the hospital wing, where they found Harry talking quietly with Remus.

"Ah, Harry, Remus," Dumbledore said expansively, "there you are!" They looked up in surprise and smiled at the Headmaster.

"Remus," Dumbledore said, "I would like to introduce you to Master Nhean. Master Nhean, this is Remus Lupin."

The two men shook hands and appraised each other. Nhean was surprised at the appearance of Remus Lupin. His greying hair and tired face gave him the appearance of being older than he actually was and Nhean was strongly convinced that there was something about Remus that was unusual. He dismissed the idea of asking about it. If he needed to know he was sure he would be told.

"I am very pleased to meet you, Mr Lupin," Nhean said with pleasure, "and even more pleased with the way you have given Harry the confidence to move around on his own."

Remus blushed and studied the tops of his rather battered shoes momentarily. "I, ah, well, thank you," he stammered. "It wasn't really me though. I mean Harry knows Hogwarts so well." He and Harry exchanged secretive grins. "I just thought that if he stopped and really thought about where he was and where he was going he'd be able to find his way."

"Nevertheless," Nhean said firmly, "it was a very clever idea and I will not allow you to avoid the credit for it." He smiled kindly at Remus and Remus blushed again and looked briefly at Harry, desperate to divert attention.

Nhean chuckled kindly at Remus' discomfort and directed his next question at Harry. "I think it's time for you and I to have a chat, Harry. Perhaps over lunch, though I suspect it will go into the afternoon a touch."

Harry nodded, both eager and a little apprehensive.

"Perhaps it would be best if you had your lunch in the Gryffindor common room," Dumbledore said. "I think this should remain a private conversation between the two of you. I shall take you there myself so that the shifting staircases do not confuse you, Harry." Harry grinned and nodded his thanks. "Remus, would you be so kind as to ask the house elves to organise lunch for Harry and Master Nhean."

Remus nodded and patted Harry on the shoulder. "I'll see you later," he said quietly and left the room.

Nhean walked over to Harry and offered his arm. "Take my arm, Harry," he said, "I think you will find that the easiest."

Harry groped forwards and slid his hand a short way through Master Nhean's arm. He felt a bit odd doing this but soon realised what Nhean had meant as they made their way out of the hospital wing. Even though he was being led, he still had a measure of control; he could after all let go whenever he wanted. It felt like Master Nhean was guiding him, rather than taking him somewhere and it made him feel much better. It wasn't long before he heard the Fat Lady asking for the password and Dumbledore replying. Master Nhean and Professor Dumbledore helped him through the entry hole and very soon he and Master Nhean were settled in at Harry, Ron and Hermione's favourite table, with a simple lunch of sandwiches and pumpkin juice in front of them. Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's head briefly before leaving.

"Perhaps we should eat first?" Nhean suggested and Harry quickly agreed. The work he had done with Snape this morning had made him hungry. They demolished the sandwiches and pumpkin juice in short order and, at Harry's suggestion, settled themselves into a couple of the soft, squashy chairs in front of the fireplace.

"Now, Harry," Nhean said quietly, "Professor Dumbledore has told me about what happened on the night you were blinded and I have no intention of revisiting that right now. Perhaps someday, if you feel up

to it, you will tell me the full details of what happened but it is not important right now." Harry relaxed and sighed in relief. Nhean smiled at the reaction and continued. "The only thing that is important is looking ahead at what needs to be done. There is no use dwelling on the past. It cannot be changed."

"Now I would like to ask you a number of questions and then after that you may have at me with any questions you may have for me," Nhean said and at Harry's nod began to ask away. To Harry's relief, Master Nhean stayed away from what happened during each of his years at school and seemed more interested in the specifics of what he had learnt in his classes and what his various teachers were like. When they got to Harry's fifth year however, Master Nhean's questions began to stray a little.

"So what did you do in response to Professor Umbridge's lessons?" Master Nhean asked.

Harry squirmed a little in his chair. "Do you mean in class or outside of it?" Harry asked.

Nhean raised both eyebrows. "Well, both if you don't mind telling me, otherwise just outside of class will do."

"Erm, well," Harry said a little uncomfortably, "in class I stood up to her, told the truth even though it got me detentions. Outside of class, we started the DA."

"The DA?" Nhean asked.

"Yeah, the Defence Association, as it was officially," Harry said, getting more enthusiastic. "Unofficially it was Dumbledore's Army, though I wish we hadn't actually written that down. It got Professor Dumbledore into a bit of trouble."

Nhean gave a shout of delighted laughter, causing Harry to grin sheepishly in response. "Who thought up that one?" Nhean asked with amusement.

"Erm, Hermione, I think," Harry replied. "But we all agreed to it. We figured it's what Fudge would fear the most and it was him we were the angriest with. Umbridge wouldn't have been there without his interference."

"True," Nhean acknowledged. "So what did you do with the DA?"

Harry went on at some length about everything he had taught them, how he had learnt it originally and how well the others had done. Nhean was a little stunned and mentally made some quick revisions to the teaching plans. He had not expected Harry to be so advanced in Defensive spells, particularly in such advanced magic as the Patronus spell. He began to get rather excited about teaching a student such as Harry.

"Truly remarkable work, Harry, I'm very impressed," Nhean said regarding the DA before getting things back on track. "Now, you took

your O.W.L. exams at the end of the last school year. What subjects do you think you did well in? What had you planned to do next year? And what were your plans for the future?"

Harry slumped in his seat as he realised that any plans he'd had were now well and truly shot to pieces. He brightened a little when he realised that he was now going to be training to become something just as remarkable, if not a little more, than an Auror. And I won't have to do Potions, he thought with a certain amount of glee.

"Well, Master Nhean," he said, turning his attention back to the questions he had been asked, "I think I definitely passed Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures and Potions, though other than Defence I'm not sure of the kinds of marks I got." He paused and then decided to go ahead. "I'm sure I got an O for Defence though. I'm pretty sure I failed History of Magic and Divination." Harry paused again for a long time. "I...I had planned on being an Auror after I finished school so I guess I had planned on taking Defence, Charms, Transfiguration and Potions next year if I got the marks."

"Good," responded Master Nhean with satisfaction. "Those tally up very well with the kinds of things I will be teaching you. What about these Occlumency lessons you spoke of in Professor Dumbledore's office?"

Harry hesitated for a long moment before he answered. "Did Professor Dumbledore tell you about my scar?" he asked.

"Yes, he did," Nhean replied. "He also told me that you have felt Voldemort's emotions and that you have been sent visions. He also told me that the scar hurts at certain times."

"Okay," Harry sighed. "Those were the reasons I was having Occlumency lessons. So that I could block out Voldemort."

"But they didn't work too well," Master Nhean prompted, feeling a little like he was pulling teeth. Clearly this was something Harry was reluctant to talk about.

"Erm, well, yes and no," Harry said slowly. "I was being taught by Professor Snape and, well, he and I..." Harry trailed off while he tried to find the best way of putting it. "Well, he and I don't really get along," he finished a little lamely and then hurried onwards. "Well, we had a...a...well, I suppose you might call it a disagreement and neither of us were inclined to continue the lessons."

Nhean considered this in silence. It was obvious that there was some deep-seated disagreement between the two that Harry did not wish to talk about. Nhean wondered whether he should push on this matter but eventually decided against it. He would much prefer that Harry tell him these things voluntarily.

"So who is teaching you now?" he asked.

"Er, well, Professor Snape, actually," he stammered. "We seem to have decided on something of a truce."

Nhean's eyebrow shot up at that statement but he chose not to comment on it. "I take it those lessons are taking place at the same time everyday?" he asked instead.

"Yes, in the morning," Harry affirmed, relieved that Master Nhean wasn't going to pursue that one.

"Very well," Nhean said, "I think you should continue those lessons for obvious reasons so I shall work in around Professor Snape's schedule. Shall we start tomorrow after your Occlumency lessons? We could meet in the Entrance Hall. I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore about a permanent place for our lessons but we will be out and about a bit."

"That sounds good to me," Harry said, starting to grin a little.

"Good," Nhean said in satisfaction. "Now I have one final question for you and then you may question me to your heart's content. Do you have any objection to Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood joining the Weasleys and Hermione when they come here?"

Harry was startled by this question and he leaned back in his chair to consider it. He didn't really have a problem with Neville being there. They'd shared a dorm for five years after all and, after finding out about Neville's parents and that it could have been Neville instead of him in Voldemort's firing line, Harry had felt on odd kind of kinship towards his fellow Gryffindor. He was hesitating more about Luna

though. She was definitely a bit odd; she often seemed a little disconnected from what was going on around her and she was very forthright when speaking. Then he remembered how she had been so loyal throughout fifth year even though she had only just met him on the train that year. She had believed him, never doubted him and had even got her father to print that article.

"No, Master Nhean," he said finally, "I don't have any objection. In fact, I'd like them to be here, they're my friends."

"Good," said Nhean in satisfaction, "I'm glad you agreed. I'm looking forward to meeting them. Now, I believe it is your turn to question me."

Harry thought for a moment, organising all his questions. He decided to start with the most recent one. "Why did you want Neville and Luna to be here as well as the Weasleys and Hermione?"

"Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Luna and Neville were the students who accompanied you to the Department of Mysteries, yes?" he said. "From what I have been told by Professor Dumbledore, the six of you worked well together there. They were also your best students in the DA as I understand it. Part of what I will teach you will be working in concert with others. I thought it might be best to use those five friends of yours."

Harry thought that one through and nodded. "What else will I be learning?"

"Ah," Master Nhean said in excited anticipation, "I will be teaching you everything I can. But I suspect you want a few more details than that!" Harry laughed and nodded. "Well, we will start by getting you used to moving around in the dark. By the time we've finished with that, you will be able to identify where you are in the castle simply by touching the walls and if you get really good, you may not even need that. You'll be able to tell where you are by the feel of the air, the way sound echoes, the smell in the air. We will also work to get your senses working to their maximum capability. Then I will start training you in wandless magic and the various martial arts we use and how to combine the two." Nhean paused and said seriously. "It will not be easy work, Harry, but I believe that if you are prepared to put in the effort you could be one of the greatest Night Warriors the Guild has ever produced."

Harry looked startled at this pronouncement. "Why?" he asked.

Nhean looked at him a little curiously and that curiosity was reflected in his voice. "You truly do not realise how remarkable your efforts in the field of Defence Against the Dark Arts have been, do you?" When Harry continued to look bewildered, Nhean continued with a small laugh. "Harry, you have mastered some highly advanced magic at a very young age. To produce such a clear and precise Patronus in, what was it, third year, is quite remarkable. And then to go on and be able to teach it to others and have them succeed." He trailed off and shook his head. "Let us just say, Harry, that I have had to revise my plans for your spell work in light of what you have told me today."

Harry continued to look stunned for a moment and then shook his head. Nhean gave a kind laugh. "Never mind, Harry. I didn't mean to embarrass or overwhelm you." Harry gave a lopsided smile and Nhean continued. "Now, we've been talking for an awfully long time and it's getting very close to dinner. Do you have any questions which

you would like to ask privately or should we head downstairs to dinner and you can ask me the questions as we go?"

Harry's stomach chose to growl at the mention of dinner and both he and Nhean laughed. "I think my stomach has just answered that question, Master Nhean!" Harry said with a grin.

They both rose from the comfortable chairs and Harry reached for Nhean's arm. They made their way down from the Gryffindor tower with Harry asking a myriad of questions about the specifics of his training. They were still in animated conversation as they came into the Great Hall. Nhean guided Harry to his seat next to Remus and took his own seat opposite him.

Remus placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and asked him how things had gone. This prompted Harry to launch into a detailed description of the things that Master Nhean had said he was going to learn. Between Remus' fascinated questions, Master Nhean's answers and the contributions from the other teachers at the table, Harry found that dinner flew by and he couldn't actually remember what he eaten or how he'd managed to eat it. After sweets, Master Nhean left to arrange things for the next day after confirming with Harry that they would meet in the Entrance Hall after Harry had finished his Occlumency lesson. After he had left Harry leaned against Remus for a while and then finally made his way back to the hospital wing. He got into bed but fell asleep before he could dwell on what had been a truly remarkable day, even for him.

Chapter 4

Harry woke up the next morning and reached for the ingenious clock that Madam Pomfrey had presented to him the night before. She had come in and woken him up but he had forgotten to be irritated at that when she explained to him why. She had said that she understood his need to be as independent as possible and this clock would help. It was a fairly ordinary muggle-type clock with a button on top that, when pressed, caused the time to spoken aloud. Harry had tried a few times last night and had been amused and a little disconcerted to find that the voice sounded remarkably like Mad-Eye Moody's. He kept waiting for the clock to bark 'Constant Vigilance!' at him as well as the time.

Pressing the button this morning didn't bring him the half-expected 'Constant Vigilance!' but it did tell him that it was 6.36 am. He lay back down, knowing it was far too early for breakfast. It still felt very strange to only see black; part of him kept wondering when they were going to turn the lights back on. He was glad that he'd been unexpectedly busy yesterday as it stopped him from dwelling on his situation. There was a fairly large part of him that just wanted to curl up on the bed and cry and scream and hide from everyone and feel sorry for himself. The only things that stopped him from indulging in that kind of tantrum was the fact that no matter how badly he had it now, he was better off than Sirius and that as much fun as that tantrum would be, it really wouldn't achieve anything.

He was extremely glad that he had Remus here. He would never be able to take the place of Sirius but Harry had a sneaking suspicion that even if Sirius was still alive he would still be turning to Remus right now. There was something very calming and very steadying about being with Remus. He pushed him to do things on his own, look at how he'd got him walking around Hogwarts, but was always there when he needed him. Harry suddenly recalled that they had

never spoken about what their relationship was to be now that Sirius was dead and he promised himself he would corral Remus sometime today and make it clear to him that he, Harry, very much wanted Remus around. He didn't care that Remus was a werewolf, he just cared about the fact that Remus was his last link to his parents and he didn't want to lose him.

He was also glad that the Weasleys would be coming. They were the closest thing to a real family that he had. He was glad however that they would not be coming immediately. He really, really wanted Mrs Weasley to have a chance to get over the news about his blinding a little bit. He was a little apprehensive about them coming, along with Hermione, Luna and Neville, though. He was really hoping that they wouldn't treat him any differently. Harry gave snort of sour amusement. He suspected that they would and he'd have to yell at them to get them to stop. Still he didn't think that Fred and George would treat him any differently, after all, they hadn't last year or during his second year or even during fourth year. He groaned softly. He was going to have to be extra careful around them. He vowed to take absolutely nothing from them. He'd often judged whether or not it was safe to take things from them by the expression on their faces. The blandness of the expression gave you an indication of exactly how dangerous what they were handing you was. Still, it would definitely be fun to have them here. He reminded himself to ask Professor Dumbledore at breakfast when they would be coming.

He placed his hands behind the back of his head and thought about Professor Snape. Not exactly his favourite topic but at the moment, well worth considering. Now that he had time to consider it, Snape's behaviour yesterday had been oddly not nasty. Apart from one crack about Voldemort, he had not said one nasty thing. In fact, Harry thought, he'd actually been given some praise for his efforts. Not exactly glowing praise but praise nonetheless. Which was decidedly odd. He wondered whether Snape was acting like that because he pitied him but dismissed that out of hand. Snape didn't do pity; it didn't exactly fit with the Snape profile. Remus had told him about

Snape's reactions at the Dursleys when they rescued him and how when they had found him, it was Snape who had held himself together and sorted things out. Harry considered the enigma that was Professor Snape for a little while longer and finally shook his head. He didn't think he was ever going to figure out the Potions Master and frankly he didn't want to. He would settle for Snape not making nasty comments about him and his parents. He didn't expect Snape to like him and he didn't expect he would ever like Snape but if things kept going the way they were, he figured he could learn to tolerate him.

He leaned over and fumbled for the clock again. On finding it he pressed the button and learned that the time was now 7:23 am. He pushed back the blankets and sat up. He found his clothes and slowly made his way to the bathroom to shower and get dressed. Thirty minutes later he was making his way up to the Great Hall for breakfast, grinning with anticipation of the day's events.

When he made his way back down to the hospital wing that evening after dinner the only thing he was looking forward to was his bed. He was utterly exhausted. First he'd had his occlumency lessons, which while they weren't physically demanding, they did require a lot of concentration and effort. He'd made some progress today though. He'd been able to find and grab Snape's mind and even to hang onto it for a short period of time. He still couldn't throw him out of his mind or stop him from getting in but Snape had seemed grumpily pleased with his progress. He'd also been the same kind of 'nice' that he'd been the previous day. Harry had not had the courage to ask him why.

His lessons with Master Nhean had been a different kettle of fish entirely. He'd found out that Master Nhean was serious about getting

him fully accustomed to moving around with out sight. They had been all over the castle today, learning how to go up and down stairs, judge distances, and not lose your balance or composure when odd things happened. It hadn't been quite as difficult as he'd thought. When they'd met in the Entrance Hall this morning, Master Nhean had presented him with a kind of walking stick to use. It was made of wood and had a good weight to it and he had found that it made walking around much easier when you could use the stick to tap around in front of you for obstacles. It had taken him a couple of hours to be comfortable using it but when he was he found that he could now get around much quicker than before.

He'd also found that he could often identify where they were by the feel of the air. For example, he'd known when they headed towards the Potions dungeon because the air got much cooler and slightly dank and he could also smell the various ingredients. Equally he'd been able to tell when they were in the Northern tower because he could smell Professor Trelawney's incense in the air. When he had told Master Nhean about this, he'd been startled to learn that he was expected to be able in the future to break down exactly what he was smelling and identify all of the elements. And that he would use this ability to make potions. He'd been flabbergasted at that piece of news. He'd thought his potion-making days were over. Master Nhean had said they would work out a time with Professor Snape for all of that.

Harry wandered into the hospital wing and made his way back to his bed, lightly tapping his cane against the beds to count them. When he got to his bed he flopped down onto it, the cane still clutched in his hand.

"You look tired," Remus commented. Harry yelped and leapt into the air, the cane clattering onto the floor. When he came down he nearly fell off the bed. Remus leapt forward, trying to stem his laughter, and helped Harry to sit on the edge of the bed. Once Harry was settled,

he couldn't help himself and burst out laughing. Harry sat scowling for a minute but gradually began to see the humour in the situation. Remus' laughter was so infectious that Harry couldn't remain irritated and slowly he began to laugh as well.

Remus finally got himself back under control. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said, still chuckling, "but the expression on your face was priceless. I didn't realise that you didn't know I was here." Remus hesitated. "You did say this morning at breakfast that you wanted to speak to me this evening."

Harry took a couple of deep breaths. "That's okay, Remus," he said with a grin, "I probably did look a little funny." He started patting the bed. "Uh, Remus, did you see what happened to my cane?" Remus looked around and saw the cane lying on the floor a short distance away. He picked it up and gave it to Harry.

"Thanks," Harry said in relief.

"Where did you get that?" Remus asked, temporarily distracted.

Harry beamed. "From Master Nhean," he said enthusiastically and proceeded to demonstrate to Remus how much easier it made things. "Not that Master Nhean is going to let me rely on it," Harry said wryly, "He's going to make sure I can move around confidently with it and without it."

Remus grinned even though he knew Harry couldn't see it. He knew the grin would come out in his voice. "I don't know, Harry, that sounds good to me."

Harry groaned and flopped backwards on the bed. "Yeah, it figures you'd agree with him," he moaned good-naturedly, "I'm exhausted, I'll have you know. Master Nhean had me traipsing all over the castle today."

Remus chuckled and grabbed the hand that Harry had just held up. He pulled Harry upright and sat down next to him. He was glad of the clowning around they were doing. He was a little nervous, he didn't know what Harry wanted to speak to him about but he was afraid that Harry didn't want him around. Merlin knows he didn't want to take the place of Sirius but he did want to stay with Harry. He liked the boy and wanted to help him through this.

"Remus," Harry said and then lapsed into silence. He sat thinking for a moment. "I...I'm not really sure how to put this so I'm just going to go ahead and say it and I hope you'll understand what I mean." Harry took a deep breath while Remus sat frozen, fearing the worst. "I know my parents didn't name you my godfather and I know that you don't want to take Sirius' place but I kind of really want you to be around. I mean you've been so great since I got here and I don't know if I'd have got through all of this the way I have if you hadn't been there." Harry's babbling increased in speed. "Anyway, what I'm trying to say is obviously the Dursleys aren't going to be my guardians anymore and, well, I really want you to be my guardian now. I mean I don't know whether they'll let you 'cause they're really stupid about you being a werewolf and all. I mean if I don't care so why should they. But I want you to be my real guardian no matter who they officially say is my guardian." Harry stumbled to a stop and waited.

Remus sat stunned, his eyes filling with tears. Of all the things he had expected Harry to say, this was not one of them. He swallowed and realised that Harry was waiting for a response.

"Harry," Remus said in wonder, "I...Of course!" He grinned in delight as Harry's request really sank in. "I...Harry, you don't know what this means to me. I...know you loved Sirius and I didn't want to intrude in what you two shared." He sobered a little. "I'm not sure the Ministry will let me be your official guardian but I'll speak to Dumbledore. We might be able to wangle it somehow and if we can't I'm sure that we'll be able to get someone who'll understand."

Harry sighed in relief and threw himself at Remus and hugged him tightly. Remus wrapped his arms around Harry in return. They sat like that for some minutes until finally Remus released Harry and brushed his hair back from his forehead.

"Thank you, Harry," Remus said, his voice full of a myriad of emotions that he was unable to put into words.

Harry seemed to understand. "That's okay, Remus," he said with what was perhaps the first truly genuine smile that Remus had seen on his face for a long time. "Though I think I'm the one who should be thanking you, really."

Remus laughed. "Now that we've got that settled," he said with satisfaction, "I think perhaps you ought to get some sleep. You look tired for some reason."

Harry laughed and took a friendly swipe at Remus. "I wonder why?" he said dryly. "Remus? How much longer do I have to stay here in the hospital wing? I mean, everything's pretty much healed now and, well, I hate staying here."

Remus laughed and considered Harry's question. It was true that medically there was no reason for Harry to stay here, they had continued with it simply because it seemed convenient.

"Where did you want to stay? Gryffindor tower?" Remus asked.

Harry considered this but quickly dismissed it. He didn't really want to be on his own and staying in the tower would very quickly get boring and lonely. He hesitated for a long moment before finally voicing what he really wanted. "Could....could I stay with you?" he asked a little timidly.

Remus was surprised into silence again but quickly recovered. "I...yes, certainly! Dumbledore gave Sirius and I a suite of rooms here to share when we stayed." Remus hesitated. "Would you mind staying in Sirius' room?"

Harry swallowed. "Um, yes, I suppose that'd be okay." He shook his head. Sirius was dead, nothing was going to change that. It wouldn't be wrong to stay in the room he had been given here at Hogwarts. Besides, he wanted to stay with Remus and a slowly growing part of him didn't like the idea of Remus staying in that suite all alone. "Yes, I want to stay with you," Harry said firmly.

Remus grinned as he helped Harry get changed and into bed. He leaned Harry's cane against the bedside table where he could easily reach it "Well then, I'll have a word with Albus. I'm sure he won't mind and we'll get everything sorted out."

Harry grinned and then laughed when he remembered something. "Will I be able to take my clock? It won't disturb you, will it?" he asked innocently.

Remus looked confused and Harry indicated the clock beside his bed. "It speaks the time when you press that button." Harry explained. "Why don't you try it?" he asked mischievously, wanting to see if Remus reacted the same way he did to the voice.

Remus eyed Harry with a little bit of suspicion and a growing smile. The expression on the boy's face indicated there was something else about this clock that Remus wasn't expecting. Still the joke was set up and he had no intention of disappointing Harry. He reached out and pressed the button.

"Eight fifty two," the clock said and Remus reacted with a startled oath. Harry burst out into peals of laughter which Remus quickly joined. When they settled down, Remus pushed the button again and listened to the clock speak the time.

"Merlin! Sounds just like Mad-Eye," he said with amusement.

"I know," Harry laughed. "I keep waiting for it to yell 'Constant Vigilance!' at me."

Remus laughed, well aware of Mad-Eye Moody's favourite saying. "Well, if it ever does, I think we'd better check on Moody. He might have died and decided to possess the clock," he said with a grin. "Now go on, go to sleep."

Harry rolled onto his side, still intermittently snorting with laughter and Remus rose and slowly walked out of the hospital wing, turning out the lights as he went.

Remus walked along the corridor leading to the Headmaster's office, still a little dazed from the conversation with Harry. He had truly not expected the direction the conversation had taken. He had thought that perhaps Harry would ask whether he could stay with Weasleys from now on. He ran a hand through his hair and gave a mirthless snort. Sirius had told him several times during the last year to stop being so down on himself and had even made the observation that he was worse now than when he was at school. Remus supposed that he was more negative about himself and more negative in general now but in school he had had the Marauders to cheer him up and make him believe in himself. None of the Marauders had ever worried about the fact that he was a werewolf and neither had Lily when she was finally let in on the secret in seventh year. But with James and Lily dead, Peter apparently dead for so many years and Sirius in Azkaban for the same time, Remus had found that his circle of friends really didn't extend past them. Dumbledore certainly was always a

friend but in a more distant way. Remus had essentially spent 15 years alone.

Remus snorted and shook his head to clear his thoughts. He'd just had some of the best news of his life and here he was getting dreary again. He just hoped that Dumbledore would be able to come up with some way of enabling Harry to be named his ward. He knew it wasn't likely; the Ministry would be very reluctant to place the Boy-Who-Lived with a werewolf. Maybe the Weasleys would take him, Remus thought; they certainly wouldn't have any problem with me being Harry's unofficial 'official guardian'.

Remus had by this time reached the gargoyle and said, "Fizzing whizzbees." The gargoyle sprang aside and Remus dawdled up the stairs, still thinking. He knocked on the Headmaster's door and entered at Dumbledore's "Come in, Remus."

"Welcome, Remus. Do sit down," Dumbledore invited.

Remus shook himself out of his thoughts and looked around. Master Nhean was sitting on the Headmaster's left and Minerva McGonagall on his right. Severus Snape was sitting in a chair on the opposite side of Professor McGonagall with a disgruntled expression on his face. This left the final chair in the small circle for himself. He slowly lowered himself into it, accepting Minerva's offer of tea and refusing the Headmaster's of a lemon drop.

"What did Harry want? If you don't mind telling us," Dumbledore asked with interest.

Remus smiled with delight. "He wanted to know if he could stay with me here at Hogwarts," Remus said, almost in wonder then sobered and looked at the Headmaster with entreaty in his eyes. "And he also wanted to know if I could be his guardian now that the Dursleys have so spectacularly disqualified themselves." His expression darkened. "Of course, I know and Harry knows that the Ministry will never allow that but he wanted me to be his guardian no matter whom the Ministry appointed." Remus sighed and stared into his tea.

Dumbledore smiled gently. "I don't see why the Ministry would refuse you if we perhaps asked for a joint guardianship. I had planned to ask Arthur and Molly Weasley if they would be willing to act as Harry's guardians and I am sure they would not object to you also being a guardian."

Remus looked up in surprise. "But..." he started to say then trailed off, unable to marshal an argument. Dumbledore had quite taken the wind out of his sails.

The Headmaster chuckled. "The Ministry after all does not need to know the exact details of the matter. They will merely assume that Harry will live at the Burrow." Remus nodded and started to smile. "As for the matter of his living arrangements here, I had been meaning to consult with you about them. Much to my delight, you and Harry have quite taken that out of my hands. I have no objection to Harry staying with you for the rest of the summer. We shall ask him at the start of the school year if he wishes to return to Gryffindor tower."

"Now," Dumbledore said, "I wish to hear how Harry's first full day of his new regime has gone. Severus?"

Snape shifted in his seat and put his tea cup down. "As you no doubt have realised, I have had to change the manner of teaching this time," he began. "As the most common method of Legilimency requires eye contact, Potter is now immune to it, as such. I am using one of the more subtle methods of attack. He seems more capable with this form of Occlumency." A small sneer wafted across Snape's face. "He is already able to identify when a strange mind is inside his own and is able to locate and capture it for a short period of time."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore. "How long do you think it will take to teach him fully?"

Snape leaned back in his chair and considered. "If the boy continues on his current rate of progress, bearing in mind he has only had two lessons, I anticipate he will be able to fully protect his mind by the beginning of the school year." Snape hesitated. "It will be possible to teach him to insinuate the mind of others with this technique, Albus, and possibly even to turn things against the Dark Lord. Do you wish me to do this?"

The others exchanged glances. Dumbledore opened his mouth to reply but was overridden by Remus. "I think that decision should be left to Harry," he said with an apologetic glance at the Headmaster. "He's been through so much this summer that I think it should be left to him to decide. Once he is able to protect his mind, tell him about what he could do with more training. He might not want to after all. I don't think we should force him to do this." When the others started to protest, Remus held up his hand and leaned forward with an earnest expression on his face. "No, we will not force him to do anything he doesn't want to do. Did you ever consider that the reason he failed so miserably with Occlumency last year was because we forced him into

it? Perhaps if we had laid the reasons for it out in front of him and let him come to the conclusion that he needed to do it on his own, it may have been more successful."

This statement silenced the others and Albus started nodding with a sad and somewhat shamed look on his face. Snape sat and considered this for a moment. "It is true that neither Potter nor I were pleased to be where we were last year," he finally conceded.

"Exactly!" Remus exclaimed. "But this time Harry asked to continue the lessons. It was his decision and now he's having some success." Remus stopped and ran his hand through his hair and he tried to find the words he wanted. "Albus, Harry and Severus still don't really like each other and it's possible they never will. There's too much history there but nobody ever said you had to like your teacher or your student. You just have to want to learn what they have to teach and they just have to be willing to teach what they know." He stopped and gave a small laugh. "After all, I didn't really like our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He thought that werewolves should be culled. But I still learnt everything he had to teach because it was important."

Albus nodded. "You are right, Remus," he said heavily, "and once again I am reminded of my errors with Harry. Very well, Severus, when you feel that Harry has mastered the art of protecting his mind you may offer the further teaching to him. Do not pressure him, even if he says no at first, he may return at a later point when he has had time to think about it."

Severus nodded and picked up his tea cup again. Dumbledore took a deep breath and turned to his old friend. "Now Nhean," he said with a hint of his usual joviality returning to his voice, "how did your day with Harry go?"

"As well as could be expected," he said calmly, "He seemed to cope much better once he got used to using the cane I gave him but he seemed startled every time I told him what he would be learning. I don't think he really grasps what he will be capable of in the future. I also caution all of you about getting too excited about how well he is adjusting. He will fall apart at some point, probably sooner rather than later. No doubt the first time he hits a real hurdle that he cannot overcome easily."

The others in the office stared at the diminutive Master for a long moment. "I...what do you mean?" Remus stammered.

Nhean looked at the others with mild surprise. "You were not the slightest bit suspicious about how well he is taking this?" he asked.

"I...well, Harry has faced tough times before," Remus said in confusion. "He has always had an excellent ability to cope with things."

"Yes, that has been how things have appeared," Nhean said sternly, "but that is not the reality." His face softened and he leaned forward to pat Remus' hand. "Do not fret yourself, my friend. Harry has a remarkable ability to hide what he is feeling and project a happy facade. I think this comes from spending ten years not being able to rely on an adult to soothe his fears or help him. He is used to being self-sufficient to a ridiculous degree and I have no doubt this has caused some of his troubles. His first reaction is not to take things to an adult but to deal with it himself because this is what he has always had to do. Hence his desire to appear able and independent now.

The only reason he has been able to carry it off so far is that he is on his own turf, you might say. He knows Hogwarts extremely well and is comfortable here."

"So what exactly are you saying, Nhean?" Albus asked with concern.

Nhean eyed them all with kindness. "Did not occur to you that a young man who has recently lost his godfather should be grieving for him? He certainly was before he was blinded, so why is he not doing that now?" Nhean asked. "Why is he not angry and bitter, even sullen and sulking? These are reactions I was expecting and was prepared for. This apparent cheer is quite frankly making me nervous. He is mashing down his emotions and that is good for neither him nor any of us. They will come out, have no fear of that and I daresay it will be quite the explosion when they do."

Remus swallowed. "What do you want from me, then?" he said firmly.

Nhean smiled at Remus. "Yes, I was hoping you would volunteer. I want you to be available during the day when he is taking his lessons from me. I doubt he will break during his occlumency lessons. The control required for them is too great to allow for that and when you add the...dislike he has for Severus, well, Harry would not allow such weakness to be seen in front of him." Snape raised a sardonic eyebrow and smirked. "He will most likely fall apart while he is with me," Nhean continued calmly, ignoring Snape's reaction, "and I would like you to be there for him. Particularly after his request tonight."

Remus nodded and then hesitated. "When do you think this is likely to occur?" he asked and chewed on his lip.

Nhean raised an eyebrow. "I intend to take him outside later this week; I suspect that he will break then. So much open space will disconcert him considerably. Why?" he asked curiously.

Remus swallowed and shot a glance at the Headmaster. "I...I may be a little...indisposed later in the week," he said slowly.

Nhean looked at him in confusion for a moment and then his face cleared. "Ah, of course, the full moon rises in three days," he said in comprehension. "But I did not intend to take Harry out at night, so surely it will be fine."

"Ordinarily, yes," Remus said reluctantly for he was not at all comfortable discussing this. "However Severus has unfortunately run out of one of the ingredients for the Wolfsbane potion and has so far been unable to obtain any more. Even if he were to find some tomorrow, it would be too late. He could not brew it in time." Remus hesitated for a long, long moment. "Without the potion, the three nights of the full moon are...bad for me, as are the days between them. I only change on the night of the full moon but the night before and after are..." Remus was silent. "...are painful," he concluded quietly. "The days in between are bad as well. I...will not be of much use to you."

Remus stared unhappily into his tea cup, refusing to meet the eyes of any of the others. Nhean watched him with a great kindness in his eyes and his voice when he spoke was gentle. "Rest easy, my friend. I will not alter my plans; truly I cannot now. I should have remembered and planned ahead, I am sorry." Nhean's voice was

sincere and caused Remus to look up in surprise. It was then he was caught by the kindness in the Night Master's face and he blushed. "We will make do with Albus and Minerva then until you are able," Nhean concluded.

Albus and Minerva nodded in agreement and Minerva leaned over to pat Remus' knee and smiled. Remus swallowed and nodded. "Why are you so determined for Harry to break down," he asked, partly to divert attention from himself but mostly because he was concerned.

Nhean sighed and his expression became worried. "Because Harry cannot continue on like this," he said firmly. "It is bad for him to bottle things up like that. He must deal with the death of his godfather and with what Vernon Dursley did to him. If he does not, well, he will be able to progress so far but no further. It will hold him back and hurt him."

Albus, Minerva and Severus all nodded in understanding. Being teachers and either Heads of Houses or a former Head of House in the Headmaster's case, they knew that this was truth. It was Severus, however who chose to speak up. "Master Nhean is correct," he said and Remus stared at him in surprise. The Potions Master scowled. "Think, man! Of all the Houses here at Hogwarts, my own is the most likely to contain students who choose not to express what they truly feel." An odd expression flowed across his face. "At least Potter's reaction is likely to go no further than an excessive tantrum and sulking." He stopped and looked uncharacteristically solemn. "There are far worse reactions," he said quietly.

Remus stared at him for a moment but it was soon clear that he had no intention of elaborating on his last statement. Remus thought about it and shuddered, recalling some of his own thoughts after he

had found out he was a werewolf. "True," he whispered uncertainly and buried his face in his hands.

"Now, now," Nhean said in a manner so reminiscent of Dumbledore that Remus was startled into checking who had actually spoken. Both Nhean and Dumbledore chuckled at his reaction and Minerva and Remus smiled. Snape alone did not smile but a look of cynical amusement lingered in his eyes.

Dumbeldore clapped his hands, still chuckling and said, "Very well, Minerva and I shall endeavour to ensure that at least one of us is always here for the next week or two and we will hope that Remus will not be too badly afflicted." He looked around the room. "Now did anyone else have anything they wished to add?"

Minerva cleared her throat. "I have spoken to Professor Marchbanks and she has agreed to send Mr Potter's O.W.L. results to me. I should receive them in the next few days. Also," she looked significantly at Albus as she continued, "I have received owls from Molly and Arthur Weasley, Mr Ron Weasley, Miss Granger and Miss Weasley all asking about when they will be able to see Mr Potter."

"Yes, as have I," Dumbledore said with amusement. "I believe that in the light of what we have heard tonight that I shall put them off until late next week at the least. I think we will want to get Harry over this particular hurdle before they arrive."

Nhean and Remus nodded and Dumbledore looked around to see if there was anything else. When no-one else spoke up he rose from

his chair. "Well then, friends, let us toddle off to our beds. I think we will need the rest."

Chapter 5

"No. No! NO! NO! NO!" Harry yelled as he backed away from Master Nhean. He stumbled on the uneven ground and fell, his cane slipping from his hand. He curled up in a ball, still chanting that negative.

Master Nhean watched this with compassion and summoned a house elf. "Please fetch Remus Lupin for me or, if he is unable to come, Professor McGonagall," he asked. The elf nodded and vanished. It was back shortly, eyes wide in distress. "I is sorry, Master sir," the little elf squeaked, "but Mr Lupin is most unwell and Professor McGonagall is being called away by the Headmaster."

Nhean sighed; the timing was indeed bad for all. Albus had had to leave the night before on Order business and as last night had been the night of the full moon, Remus' indisposition was to be expected. That Albus had to also call on Minerva did not bode well for whatever the Order business was. He wracked his brains for who else he could call on. Hagrid was still in Europe with Madame Maxime and none of the other teachers still in residence were close enough to Harry to get through to him right now. Nhean froze and a small, curious little smile crept onto his face. Severus had mentioned that he was not unused to reactions such as this. While it was true he and Harry did not get along, he did have experience on his side.

Nhean looked down at the little elf, who was eyeing Harry with a mix of nervousness and concern. "Could you please ask Professor Snape if he could come here?" he asked and the little elf nodded and disappeared. A few minutes later, Professor Snape stalked out of the castle with a thunderous expression on his face. He came to stop when he saw Harry curled up on the ground and a number of

complex emotions crossed his face. He walked over to Master Nhean and returned the Night Master's nod.

"Thank you for coming, Severus," Nhean said quietly. "As you can see, I think I need your help."

Snape's lips thinned and he watched as Harry started rocking, his chanting becoming softer. "Surely Minerva or Lupin would have been a better choice," he asked.

"Probably," Nhean said mildly, "but neither are available. Remus must truly be feeling unwell and Minerva has been called out by Albus. I was left with you and you mentioned obliquely the other night that you are not without experience with this sort of thing. I am not close enough to Harry to be able to get him out of this."

"Potter and I are hardly friends," Snape snapped.

"I am aware of that," Nhean said patiently, "but you do know him far better than I. Will you help him?"

Snape glared at Nhean and strode over to where Harry lay on the ground. As he knelt down he could hear Harry chanting to himself. He paused to try and make some sense of it.

"No, no, no, no...Sirius...watch out, Bellatrix there...NO! SIRIUS!" Harry gasped. "No, no, no, no...No, Uncle Vernon, please, I'm sorry, I didn't know...Pig!"

Severus grimaced. Sirius bloody Black and the beating from his Uncle, he thought to himself. He reached out and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and shook him gently. "Potter," he said.

Harry whimpered and drew himself into a tighter ball. Severus sighed in exasperation. Trust Harry Potter to make things difficult. He shook Harry gently once more but again this only prompted the boy to draw himself further inwards. He sighed again and shifted himself around to a position where he could draw the boy out of his curl. This action brought Harry back to himself a little and Severus saw the boy's bottom lip start to quiver. Harry sucked in a deep breath and seemed to be trying to get himself back under control. Severus was determined to stop this and thought back to how they had found Harry and what he had found out both that night and subsequently about Harry's upbringing. Finally acknowledging that perhaps he had misjudged the boy and that maybe it was time he stopped assuming that the boy was like his father, Severus drew in a deep breath and pulled Harry into his arms. He started slowly rocking Harry back and forth and tried to aim for a paternal tone.

"It's alright, Harry," Snape said quietly, "let it out."

Harry stiffened as he realised who held him but the quiet, almost caring tone of his professor's voice seemed to be what did the trick. The thought that even the professor that hated him the most cared enough about him to help him was his undoing and he broke down in tears. As he wept into Snape's black robes, the Potions Master rocked him back and forth and muttered calming words to him.

Nhean watched the two of them, pleased and surprised that Severus had been able to get through to Harry. He made a small motion with one hand to gain Snape's attention and gestured to ask if he should remain. Snape shook his head and Nhean quietly made his way back to the castle, only pausing to pick up Harry's cane and place it next to the Potions Master.

Gradually Harry's tears began to slow and he stopped gasping for breath. When they finally stopped he raised his head and asked, "Why?"

Severus sighed and considered the rather complex question he had just been asked. "Because no one deserves what was done to you by your Uncle," he said neutrally. "Because you are not to blame for Black's death." He sighed again and said somewhat reluctantly, "Because I was wrong to assume you were a carbon copy of your father."

Harry nodded and sniffed. He moved away from Snape a little and the Potions Master helped him to sit properly on the ground. Snape picked up Harry's cane and handed it to him. Harry's hands curled protectively around the cane as Snape said simply, "Tell me."

Harry took a deep breath. "I hate this!" he half-yelled, "I hate feeling so bloody helpless! I hate not being able to see! I hate my Uncle for doing this to me!" Harry's voice began to rise in anger. "I hate Aunt Petunia and Dudley for not stopping him or helping me!" Harry quivered and then he yelled in anguish, "I hate Sirius for dying! Why

did he have to die? It was my mistake; I should have been the one!" Harry collapsed against Snape and wept again.

Snape put one arm around Harry and began the task of rebuilding the boy. "There is nothing wrong with hating your situation," he said calmly. "You would be unusual if you did not. I see nothing wrong with hating your Uncle. What he did was abuse, plain and simple. No matter what stress he was under, that does not excuse or mitigate his behaviour." Snape paused to see if his words were getting through to the boy. From the way his tears were trailing off, it seems they were. "As for your Aunt and cousin, do you know whether they tried to stop your Uncle or help you?" Harry shook his head. "Then I'd reserve judgement on them until you know. It may be they tried."

Severus stopped and sighed. He did not like Sirius Black at all and had struggled to regret the hairy idiot's death. But it was clear that his death was what was haunting Potter the most, along with his feelings of responsibility for it.

"Black's death was not your fault," he said through gritted teeth. "While gallivanting off to the Department of Mysteries like that was undoubtedly one of the more stupid things you have done, nobody forced Black to come after you. In fact, the Headmaster and Lupin urged him to remain at Grimmauld Place. Black made his own decisions and he must bear the responsibility for them, not you." Snape paused. "And I am sure that you do not hate that damn dog."

Harry sat up again and gave a weak laugh. "You know I think that's the nicest thing I've ever heard you say about Sirius," he said.

Snape snarled half-heartedly, it was true after all. He scowled at Harry but stopped when he realised how totally ineffective that tactic was now. "Indeed," he said dryly. "Potter, while your self-sufficiency is admirable, it is completely inappropriate at most times. Did it not occur to you to speak to Lupin about this?"

"I...I..." Harry stammered, "I thought he had enough to deal with. I mean, he knew Sirius better than I did. I didn't want to be a burden."

"Then I suppose it has also never occurred to you that that is the job of an adult," Snape said with some exasperation, "to deal with the problems of children?"

"I..well, I guess not," Harry said lamely.

"I rather suspected that," Snape said with asperity. "Contrary to your experiences with your former guardians, you can trust adults with your problems. Perhaps if you chose to talk things over with Lupin or the Headmaster or Professor McGonagall or any adult really, you might have made some different decisions during the last school year. Do not think I do not know what went on during your detentions with that idiot woman Umbridge."

Harry flinched at the reminder of those detentions and he quickly covered the hand that still had the thin lines spelling out 'I must not tell lies' on it.

"Yes, that punishment," Snape continued relentlessly, "Had you gone to Professor McGonagall or the Headmaster or any teacher at the school, we would have had a good chance at getting rid of that woman. But as no student came forward, we could do nothing."

"But I didn't think you would have been able to do anything," Harry said in surprise.

"Fool boy," Snape snapped. "Not even that idiot Fudge would have been able to defend the use of a quill like that." He scowled. "Those quills are considered dark magic and were meant to have all been destroyed. How she got hold of one I can only guess."

Harry's shoulders slumped and he began to silently berate himself, loading even more guilt onto his own shoulders. Snape watched this with annoyance. He had never been able to understand Potter's absurd insistence in taking the blame for the actions of all and sundry.

"Stop that," he snapped and Harry flinched. Snape sighed and his voice became gentler. "Stop blaming yourself for everything that happens in the wizarding world. Let people take responsibility for their actions and worry about your own. You have more than enough to worry about without adding other people's loads to yours."

Snape stood and brushed off his robes. He held out his hand and said, "Now, give me your hand and I will take you in to see Lupin. He is probably worrying himself over you since he was unable to come."

Harry nodded and reached out. Snape grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. He steadied Harry and turned him towards the castle. "Do you need any help?" he asked.

"Erm, yes sir," Harry said and then continued with a little trepidation. "If I could take your arm, sir, that would be best."

Snape harrumphed and guided Harry's hand to his arm and began to lead him back to the castle. "I trust you will not continue this habit of keeping things to yourself?" he said archly.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied quietly and Snape shot him a quick glance. The boy seemed fairly depressed but from experience he knew that was perfectly normal and that only time would help with that.

They were both quiet as Snape lead Harry back to the suite he was now sharing with Remus. Snape could see that the boy was thinking and was inclined to leave him to it. They reached the portrait door to the suite and Harry spoke the password, "Golden snitch." Snape continued to lead Harry through to Remus' room. He was reluctant to leave the boy until he was sure that he was with somebody. Potter would be somewhat fragile just now and would need have an eye kept on him.

He knocked on Lupin's door, opened it at the werewolf's acknowledgement and was unexpectedly forced to give a startled gasp.

"Sir?" Harry asked, suddenly worried.

"It's alright, Harry," Remus called out to him, "There's nothing wrong, I just...don't look that well." In truth, the werewolf looked terrible; his face was drawn and grey and his hands were visibly shaking even when placed flat on the bedspread. "It seems that an unexpected side effect of the Wolfsbane potion is that if you stop taking it, the change becomes...so much worse," he said wanly.

Harry broke away from Snape and made his way as quickly as he could to Remus' bedside and sat down on the edge of the bed, his face worried. Snape looked at the werewolf, his facial expression almost bordering on concerned.

"I...apologise, Lupin," he said stiffly, "I shall ensure that I always have sufficient ingredients available in the future." He nodded briefly to the startled-looking Lupin and withdrew from the room.

"Huh, that was odd," Remus said to Harry with surprise.

"Yeah, I guess," Harry replied glumly.

Remus eyed Harry and chewed on his bottom lip. The young man sitting on the side of his bed looked miserable and defeated, his blind eyes staring blankly at the floor. "So, Master Nhean was right," he said quietly.

"Huh?" Harry said in surprise.

"Master Nhean was worried about you," Remus explained. "You were unnerving him with how well you were coping and he thought perhaps you were hiding things." Remus paused. "Harry, why didn't you say something to me? Write a letter? Anything!"

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again, tears welling up in his eyes. "...I thought you had enough on your plate," he said miserably. "I didn't want to worry you."

Remus sighed and crawled around in his bed until he was sitting cross-legged next to Harry, ignoring the protests of his aching body and swallowing down the nausea. He hadn't realised what effect his own preoccupation had had on Harry. He had been so caught up in his misery over Sirius' death he had almost forgotten that Harry had lost a godfather. He put one arm around Harry's shoulders and vowed to do better by his best friend's son.

"Alright, Harry," he said firmly, "I think we need to make a promise to each other. No more hiding things. And I think under the circumstances, you get to start first."

Harry gave a wan half-smile. "Okay, Remus," he said. "Where do you want me to start?"

"How about with the Dursleys and your life there and just go onwards up until now," he said. "I was already planning to have my meals sent here today. I'm sure they'll add yours to it." Remus gave Harry's shoulders a quick squeeze. "We've got all day if you want and all night as well if it comes to that."

Harry drew in a shuddering breath and started talking. And he kept talking. He spoke about his early life with the Dursleys, about what happened when he got his letter and how weird and confusing it had felt to find out he was famous in the wizarding world. He spoke about his first year at Hogwarts, how great it had been to have such good friends, how hard it had been to fit in and all that had happened with the Philosopher's Stone. He spoke about how hard it had been to go back to the Dursleys and how they had reacted to having him back. He spoke about the Weasleys' rescue mission and how much fun it had been to stay at the Burrow.

He spoke about his second year, about Gilderoy Lockhart, about hearing that voice and finding out he was a Parselmouth, about how most of his schoolmates had turned on him, thinking he was the heir of Slytherin, how much that had hurt and what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets. He spoke about having to return again to the Dursleys and about blowing up Aunt Marge and running away and the fright seeing what he thought was Grim but was actually Sirius. He spoke about overhearing the Weasleys talking about Sirius and Mr Weasley's warning. He spoke about how much the Dementors affected him and what he heard when they were near. He spoke about how much they'd like having Remus as their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, how much they had learned from him. He spoke about that overheard conversation between Hagrid, Professor McGonagall, Minister Fudge, Rosmerta and Professor Flitwick. He spoke about Professor Trelawney's second prophecy and about what had happened in the Shrieking Shack. He spoke about how happy he had been at Sirius' offer of a new home and how he had felt when everything had fallen apart. He spoke about Hermione's Time Turner and how he thought it was his father across the other side of the lake.

He spoke about the misery he'd felt having to return yet again to the Dursleys when he'd almost had something better. He spoke about how much fun he'd had at the Quidditch World Cup and what had happened afterwards. He spoke about the Triwizard Tournament and how hurt he'd felt that Ron hadn't believed him. He spoke about his mixed feelings about the tasks; how he had been terrified and completely unprepared, how Hermione, Ron, Dobby and the others had helped him, how exhilarating it had been to succeed. He spoke about the third task and what had happened in the graveyard, the death of Cedric and his guilt about that, his duel with Voldemort, the Priori Incantatem and the 'ghosts' that had helped him. He spoke about his frustration at being stuck at the Dursleys yet again and not being told anything and about the Dementor attack. He spoke about 12 Grimmauld Place and how great it had been to see Sirius again but how confused he had been the entire year with the way Sirius had acted. He spoke about the trial and how he felt about the Ministry in general.

He spoke about returning to Hogwarts and the reactions of his fellow students and the appearance of Umbridge. He spoke about his detentions with the DADA teacher and his formation of the DA. He spoke about his Occlumency lessons and the dreams and visions that had prompted them, about how frustrated and angry he had felt for most of the year and how it had hurt to have Professor Dumbledore practically ignore him. He spoke about his increasing frustration about not being told about anything that was going on.

He paused for a long time before he started speaking about the vision Voldemort had sent him about Sirius being tortured. He spoke about how he had tried to contact him but had only got Kreacher, about how Snape had appeared to ignore him in Umbridge's office when he tried to tell him, how Hermione had gotten them free and how she and Ron, along with Ginny, Neville and Luna had refused to let him go to the

Ministry on his own. He spoke about how angry and stupid he had felt when he realised it had all been a trick and how they had fought the Death Eaters. He spoke about the fight in the Ministry and how he had felt when Sirius fell through the Veil. He spoke about his chase after Bellatrix, how he had felt and how he used Cruciatus against her. He spoke about Dumbledore's battle with Voldemort and how the Dark Lord had tried to possess him. He spoke about his rage and his tantrum in Dumbledore's office, how he had yelled at the Headmaster, how he had reacted to finding out the prophecy. He spoke about the last few weeks of the school year and how hard it had been.

It was evening before he finally fell silent, voice hoarse and mouth dry. He and Remus sat there for a while; both deep in thought and the only sounds in the room came from the crackling of the fire. Harry was surprised to find that he was feeling a lot better. He felt oddly lighter, as though a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He still felt miserable and angry and bitter and confused but somehow those feelings seemed smaller and more manageable now. He hadn't been sure that he was going to be able to tell Remus much of anything but once he'd started it all just seemed to come pouring out and he hadn't been able to stop.

For his part, Remus was struggling to keep the wolf leashed. He had never known just what Harry had been through, not just at the Dursleys but also at Hogwarts. "I...They...She," he sputtered before taking a deep breath in order to calm down enough to get a full sentence out. "Harry, why didn't you tell anyone this?" he asked in shock.

Harry's head drooped and Remus mentally kicked himself. He took another deep breath and wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. "I'm sorry, that was a stupid question to ask," he said.

"No, I guess it wasn't really," Harry said quietly. "I mean, Sn...Professor Snape has already said that..." Harry paused and tried to remember the exact words. "That my self-sufficiency is admirable but completely inappropriate at most times. Or something along those lines."

Remus chuckled, inwardly surprised at the comment and how accurate it was. "He has a point, though I probably wouldn't have put it that way. Anyway, my question was stupid. You didn't tell an adult because you didn't know whether you could trust us."

"I...no, that's not it," Harry said in surprise then stopped and thought. "Well, yeah, I suppose it might be that. I guess I just thought that every adult was like the Dursleys. I mean, during the holidays after third year when my scar started hurting, I couldn't think who to tell at first. I couldn't tell Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, they wouldn't have cared. I didn't want to disturb Professor Dumbledore. I didn't really want to tell Ron and Hermione because I knew what their reaction would be and I didn't want that right then." Harry rolled his eyes, which Remus thought an odd gesture. Then he swallowed a grin as he realised that Harry was likely to continue with little things like that even though his sight was gone. Habits tend to be hard to break. He told himself to stop wool gathering as Harry continued.

"It took me ages to think of asking Sirius," he said self-deprecatingly. "I guess I just wasn't used to having an adult I could tell. Because that's what I wanted, you know? An adult I could tell."

"Why did you think you would be disturbing Professor Dumbledore?" Remus asked quizzically. "Surely you know he wouldn't think something like your scar hurting was trivial?"

Harry looked a little shamefaced. "I...I don't know," he said softly. "I guess I just didn't want a fuss made over it."

Remus sighed. It was at times like this he wondered how Severus could believe that Harry wanted or enjoyed his fame. He grinned a little after a moment; then again, Severus and Harry did have a tendency to bring out the worst in each other. It was at this point that he realised that as Severus had been the one to bring Harry back to the suite, it must have been he who Nhean had summoned. Remus frowned and looked down at the downcast boy by his side.

"Harry? Why did Professor Snape bring you back here?" he asked.

"Well, when I..." Harry stopped and shrugged a reluctant shoulder. "When I , well, you know, well, Professor Snape was the one who got me out of it." Harry frowned and thought back to what had happened. "He was...I don't know...nice...for Snape. He seemed to know what to say and do. I don't know, it was kind of weird but he wasn't nasty or anything." Harry gave a lopsided grin. "He made a few snide comments but he wouldn't be Snape if he didn't do that. He was even polite about Sirius." Harry laughed softly. "He kind of helped me and yelled at me at the same time."

Remus laughed, pleased that the surly Potions Master had unbent enough to help Harry when he really needed it. He then recalled what Severus had said about having to deal with situations such as this before with students from his house. "So are you going to listen to him," he asked with certain amount of humour.

"Well, I don't normally," Harry said with a smile, "but I think he might be right this time, so I guess I will."

"Good," Remus said. "I know you don't particularly like him, Harry, but he has a lot to teach you if you let him."

"I...I know," Harry said, "I kind of figured part of it out during that first week here. It wouldn't matter even if he did like me, he couldn't show it. As far as the Junior Death Eaters are concerned, he is still loyal to Voldemort. If he treated me nicely somehow I think that Voldemort might get a bit suspicious."

Remus snorted with laughter. "Junior Death Eaters? Where did you come up with that one?"

"Well, they are, aren't they?" Harry said with a smile. "Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson and a few others. All trying so hard to be like their parents. Stupid, really. Can't they think for themselves?" Harry snorted in disgust.

Remus eyed Harry with a kind of interested respect. "That's a very mature outlook, Harry."

"Yeah, well, I guess my perspective kind of got changed last year," Harry said glumly. "After seeing that stuff in Snape's pensieve, I really didn't want to be like my Dad or Sirius. I mean, I know they weren't

always like that and I guess my Dad changed a lot to get my Mum interested in him but still..."

"Don't judge your father or Sirius too harshly," Remus said sadly. He sighed. "There was just something about Severus that brought the worst out of the two of them. They were a touch arrogant," Remus admitted reluctantly, "but they were teenage boys. Your childhood and teenage years are supposed to be the times when you can be stupid without it mattering too much." He was quiet for a moment and then laughed. "And yes, you're right. James did change quite a bit before Lily would even look twice at him. He got his head down to a decent size and stopped just assuming she was going to like him."

Harry looked towards Remus with interest. "How did that happen though? Did...what happened in your sixth year have anything to do with it?"

"Yes, a little," Remus said and leaned back against the wall. He thought back to that terrible night. While he didn't tend to remember the exact details of what happened when he changed, particularly before he started taking the Wolfsbane potion, he did remember the generalities of what he did. He shuddered as he thought how close he had come to killing Severus that night. It was only because even the werewolf wasn't game enough to take on Prongs and that rack of antlers he had that he had gotten away with that one.

"Remus?" Harry asked hesitantly. "What happened that night?"

Remus sighed and closed his eyes. Perhaps Harry should know, he thought, if only to understand why Severus reacts to us the way he

does. He looked down to where Harry was sitting, half-smiling at the expression on his face. He clearly thought he had overstepped the boundaries and that he was going to be yelled at.

"I wasn't surprised to hear someone coming down the tunnel," Remus said, almost thoughtfully, "because I was expecting Prongs, Padfoot and Wormtail. They always joined me as soon as they could sneak away at night. So I made my way out of the room I usually went to and crouched down by the entrance. It was spelled so that I couldn't open it from inside the Shrieking Shack. I have some vague memories of thinking that the scent wasn't quite right but the door was opened before I could identify exactly who it was."

Remus gave an odd laugh. "It was Severus, of course, and I clearly remember the expression on his face. It was a mix of horror, fear and what I could only describe as a 'hah-I-was-right' look. Then it pretty much became pure fear as he realised that he was facing a werewolf who wasn't pleased to see him. He turned and ran and I started chasing him." Remus stopped at the expression on Harry's face and hurried to reassure him. "Not out of malice, Harry, but for the same reason that any predator will chase prey that runs. For the thrill of the chase. Oh, I probably would have killed him if I'd caught him, at the very least I'd have bitten him but I never got a chance. I was loping along the tunnel after Severus when I had to come to a very sudden halt. I think Severus had fallen or perhaps he had dropped to the ground when he saw Prongs, either way I ended up being faced with a very angry Prongs. Now you might not think a deer could be much threat to a werewolf but in that narrow tunnel I couldn't attack his flanks and I was facing that very impressive rack of antlers that Prongs possessed." Remus paused and laughed. "There was a reason we called him Prongs after all."

"So, he herded me back into the Shrieking Shack, transformed and shut the door in my face. I didn't find out what happened after that

until the morning when Professor Dumbledore came to get me. He explained that Severus would not tell any of the students what happened. Prongs was waiting for us in the Entrance Hall and he explained how Severus had gotten there and hustled me off to the Room of Requirement. He knew I'd be angry and he wanted me somewhere private so that I could let off steam. He'd spent the entire night with the Headmaster and Severus so when Sirius came waltzing in with Peter as though nothing had happened, it was the first time he'd had a chance to confront Padfoot about it."

Remus laughed ruefully and ran his hand through his hair. "James was furious with Sirius and believe me, that was a first. He didn't even give Sirius a chance to say anything; he just started yelling at him. And when James finished, I started. Merlin! I'd never been so angry. I could have killed Severus." Remus laughed quietly again. "Not that it had too much of an affect on Sirius. Oh, he was pretty apologetic for about a week, particularly with me. But he refused to apologise to Severus and when he wasn't thinking he'd act as though it was just some huge joke and he was disappointed that we didn't think it was funny." Remus shook his head.

"But that was Sirius; irrepressible and, at times, irresponsible. It was almost impossible to stay angry with him though. It tended to drive us completely around the bend at times but it was part of his unique charm, I suppose," Remus said dryly.

Harry laughed and then sobered. "I guess I can understand why Professor Snape hated him so much then." Harry frowned. "But why wouldn't he apologise? Surely he realised that he'd done something pretty bad?"

"Yes, he did," Remus answered, "but he refused because it was Severus. Sirius could be absolutely pig-headed about some things and Severus was one of those things."

"But why?" Harry persisted.

"Honestly? I don't know. Maybe it was something as simple as hate at first sight, like you and Draco Malfoy." Harry grinned. "Maybe it was because the Snape family has often been associated with the Dark Arts and Sirius, for all his faults, hated the Dark side of magic. Maybe it was just some weird little thing inside Sirius' idiot brain, I don't know."

Harry snorted and Remus gave him a nudge. "Come on, Harry. I think its time both of us got some rest." Harry nodded and pushed his way off the bed. He was half-way out of the room when Remus spoke up. "And Harry? You won't keep things from any of us anymore, will you? You know you can tell me anything?"

Harry turned and gave Remus a sweet smile. "Yeah, Remus, I promise," he said a little tremulously. "Just don't die on me, please."

Remus ignored the aches of his body and jumped out of bed. He wrapped Harry up in a hug and said fiercely, "I'm not going anywhere, I promise!"

Chapter 6

Three days later, Harry was standing in the Entrance Hall beside Remus, fidgeting slightly. The last three days had not been easy. It had been especially difficult to go back down to the dungeons for his Occlumency lessons. He had been afraid that Snape would use his breakdown to torment him but apart from a perfunctory 'You're welcome' when Harry had thanked him, the subject had not been discussed. He had also had trouble getting around with Master Nhean for the first two days; almost as though he was afraid. That had continued only until Remus had come across them on the second day and had scolded him into going back to the basics of picturing the route to where he wanted to go.

Now he was waiting for the arrival of the Weasleys, Hermione, Neville and Luna. They were coming on the Knight Bus to Hogsmeade and then walking up and were due at any minute. When he heard the sound of talking outside, he nearly bolted. It was only Remus' firm hand on his shoulder that stopped him.

"It'll be alright," Remus soothed and Harry calmed a little. He and Remus had spent a lot of time during the last three days talking and Harry felt closer to the werewolf than he had to anyone else, including Sirius. He had been startled when he first realised that but then it occurred to him that it made sense. He and Sirius had never really had the opportunity to get to know each other. Harry felt a pang of regret at this.

All thoughts flew out of his mind however when he heard the main doors bang open and the sound of excited talking.

"Harry!" he heard Hermione yell and he was suddenly being hugged very tightly, his face full of bushy hair.

"Mione! Ease up on the bloke, you'll break his ribs," he heard Ron say and Hermione reluctantly let him go. Then he was being whacked firmly on the shoulder. "How are you, mate?"

Much to Ron and Hermione's surprise, he broke into a wide grin. "I'm okay," he said.

He didn't get chance to say anything else. He was engulfed in a hug and he heard Mrs Weasley say, "Oh, Harry dear, are you alright?"

"Oy, leave off Mum," he heard one of the twins say. "Let him breathe."

Molly Weasley pulled away and kissed him on the forehead and then he was engulfed by the twins. They slapped him on the back and ducked for cover when their mother started scolding them. She pulled something off the back of his jumper and Harry grinned again. Fred and George would never change.

Before he had a chance to react any further, he heard a "Hello, Harry, you're looking well" from Luna Lovegood and a "Hi, Harry!" from Neville. He returned their greetings.

Harry frowned when he realised that Ginny hadn't said hello and that he couldn't hear her voice amongst all the noise. He headed over to where he could hear Mrs Weasley's voice coming from.

"Mrs Weasley?" he asked. "Is Ginny here?"

"I'm over here, Harry," he heard Ginny say in a tear-filled voice. He grinned and walked towards her, lightly tapping his cane in front of himself.

"Hey, Gin," he said cheerfully. "I was wondering where you'd got to."

There was silence from Ginny at first and then she threw herself at him and hugged him in what rapidly became a death grip. He hugged her back and said, "Ease up, Gin. My ribs."

Ginny let him go quickly with a sudden apology. He laughed. "No harm done. It's just that they're only recently healed. Gotta give them a rest." He paused when she didn't respond "I'm alright, Ginny, I promise. I'm even getting used to not being able to see and I've got a great new teacher. I think he wants all of us who went to the Ministry to train to together at some point."

Before Ginny could respond, they were interrupted by Remus. "Come on everyone, let's get you all up to the Gryffindor tower. Yes, even you Luna, no point opening two towers up." He stopped next to Harry

to allow him to take his arm and they made their noisy way up to the tower.

The Gryffindors immediately headed up to their respective dormitories to put away their things with Hermione inviting both Luna and Ginny to stay in her dormitory. Mrs Weasley bustled through the door to the girl's dormitories after them, saying that she would take a bed in the lowest room. Remus settled Harry into a chair and the two of them burst out laughing.

"It's like being engulfed by the tide, isn't it?" Remus said.

"I know," Harry replied, grinning. "Fun, though."

Remus patted his shoulder, still laughing, and said, "Molly and I are going to head up to Dumbledore's office as soon as she gets back. We've got some Order stuff to go through as well as organising your guardianship papers. We'll leave you kids to it."

Harry grinned. "You just can't keep up," he teased.

"Definitely not!" Remus exclaimed and went over to intercept Molly when she came back out. The two of them disappeared through the entrance hole and Harry leaned back into the chair and waited for the others to come back down. He'd been gradually feeling better about things over the last few days, although he still had his really down moments, but the whirlwind arrival of the Weasleys and the others had definitely put him in a cheerful mood. They were obviously

worried about him but were also determinedly treating him as normally as they could.

"Harry!" he heard Hermione exclaim. "Where has Professor Lupin gone?"

Harry was startled to hear Remus referred to like that but then laughed at himself. "He's gone to Professor Dumbledore's office with Mrs Weasley. They have some Order business to take care of and he thought we could look after ourselves."

He could hear that the other girls were with Hermione and the three of them settled themselves in various chairs near Harry. Just then Ron, Fred, George and Neville came thundering down the stairs from the boy's dorms and they too collapsed into chairs. A thick silence fell as everyone wondered what to say and Harry started laughing.

The others stared at him for a moment until finally Ron said, with mock concern, "Well, it's official, Harry's flipped his lid."

This made Harry laugh even harder and the others joined in. When they finally got themselves back under control, the mood was much more relaxed.

"Are you really alright?" Hermione asked hesitantly, clearly remembering Harry's reaction to such questions last summer.

Harry gave a wry half-smile. "Don't worry, Hermione, I'm not going to start yelling again. I've already got all of that out of my system." They all laughed and Harry continued. "I'm mostly alright. You know, some days are good and some days are bad." Harry paused and grinned. "Today's definitely a good day."

There was another long silence. "What...what's it like, you know, being blind?" Neville asked timidly.

"Neville!" Hermione said scandalised but Harry interrupted her before she could say any more.

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry said, "It's kind of weird. I mean, don't get me wrong, I hate it." The others were startled at the vehemence in his voice. "But whether I hate it or not, I've got to get used to it."

Ron frowned. "But isn't there some kind of magical healing?" he asked, "Or couldn't you get magical eyes like Moody's?"

"Yeah, I asked about that," Harry sighed. "They could have healed my eyes magically if they'd got to me within an hour or two of the injuries occurring. Apparently it's one of those types of healing that has a really limited timeframe because of the delicacy of the eye."

"But what about magical eyes?" Ron asked.

"Well, they can't do that either," Harry said in resignation. "If I was blinded only in one eye it would have worked. Apparently you have to have one normal eye. The magical eyes are a bit hard to take what with the amount of information they give you. And the sight through one of those magical eyes isn't exactly what you would call 'normal'. It's really enhanced; remember Moody could see right through my invisibility cloak. I asked if there were just normal magical eyes but apparently in order to get them to work the magic has to be pretty strong and that affects what you see." Harry gave a wry laugh. "Reading between the lines of what they told me, only seeing the world through magical eyes would drive you nuts pretty quickly."

"Bugger!" said one of the twins, Harry couldn't figure out which. "So what do you do now?"

"Dumbledore had that one figured out pretty quickly," Harry said and then he started to grin wickedly at where he thought Hermione was sitting. "To echo his question, tell me, have you ever heard of the Guild of the Night?"

The confused silence that followed answered his question and he laughed.

"What is the Guild of the Night?" Hermione asked, her voice full of interest and curiosity. "And what does it have to do with what you are going to do now?"

Harry grinned, he knew Hermione wouldn't have been able to resist asking, and the others started laughing and teasing her. She glared

at them and Harry quietened them all by telling them about Master Nhean and his new study program. He also told them that he was doing Occlumency lessons again.

"Are you doing them with Dumbledore this time?" Hermione asked.

"No, with Snape," Harry replied and waited with an inward grin for the reaction.

"That greasy git!" Ron exclaimed, fulfilling Harry's expectations. Fred and George echoed Ron's sentiments but the three of them fell silent when they realised Harry was grinning openly at them.

"What are you grinning at, Harry?" Ron exclaimed, throwing his arms up in the air. "You really have gone barmy, haven't you?"

Harry spluttered with laughter and shook his head. "No, I haven't gone barmy, Ron," he said with amusement and then settled down and frowned. "The lessons haven't been that bad this time. We're using a slightly different method and Snape...well, Snape's been different."

"How different?" Ron asked suspiciously. "You don't mean that he's actually being nice, do you? Does he even know how?"

"Ron!" Hermione admonished and everyone laughed.

"Well, it's kind of hard to explain," Harry said thoughtfully. "Snape came with Remus to rescue me and Remus said that Snape acted kind of odd, like he actually cared about me." This was greeted by a variety of disbelieving snorts. "And since then he's been...well, I wouldn't say nice but he has been a lot less nasty than usual."

"You're kidding," burst out Ron, Fred and George. "No way, it's got to be a trick of some kind," continued Ron.

"Ron!" Hermione said with exasperation. "Professor Snape is not some kind of monster!"

"Hermione's right," Harry said firmly, surprising all of the Gryffindors. "Look, I've had a lot of time to think about all of this. Don't you see, Snape had to treat me the way he has. Voldemort thinks that Snape's still a loyal Death Eater and with all the children of Death Eaters here at Hogwarts, if Snape treated me as anything other than his enemy, the word would get back pretty quickly and Voldemort would get pretty suspicious." Harry sighed. "Besides Snape's helped me a lot in the last couple of weeks."

Harry proceeded to tell them of his little breakdown and Snape's role in helping him. He was bombarded with questions about it and finally he said a little testily, "Look, it happened because I was keeping everything all bottled up, okay! I wasn't telling anybody anything and Master Nhean predicted I'd blow up at some point. He said I couldn't bottle up my feelings about Sirius dying and being blinded forever and he had Remus and a few others ready for when I broke. As it turned out Remus was pretty ill, Professor Dumbledore and Professor

McGonagall were away and that just left Snape." Harry paused and said quietly and earnestly. "He really helped. He knew the right things to say. The whole time since I was rescued he's known when to be silent, when to say something nice...well, nice for him and when to give me a boot up the arse."

The others were quiet for a moment. "You not still keeping things to yourself, are you Harry?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"No, Remus and I made a deal," Harry said with a small grin. "We agreed not to keep things from each other. And he's going to be my new guardian, along with your parents, Ron."

"Well, it's about they made it official," one of the twins said, laughing. The other continued, "After all Harry, you've been an unofficial ickle brother for ages!"

Everyone roared with laughter and the Weasleys immediately started teasing Harry, coming up with increasing bizarre things he'd be required to do as the newest Weasley. Not surprisingly Fred and George managed to come up with the best ideas.

Eventually they all settled down. "Why is Professor Lupin also your guardian?" Hermione asked.

"Actually it's the other way around," Harry answered. "I wanted Remus to be my guardian but we rather thought that the Ministry wouldn't let that happen so we needed someone else to be joint

guardians to make them happy." Harry shrugged. "Who else other than Mr and Mrs Weasley? They've been the closest things to real parents that I've ever had."

"Why wouldn't the Ministry allow Professor Lupin to be your guardian? He seems quite suitable," asked Luna and the others all looked at her strangely.

"Erm, because Remus is a werewolf," Harry said carefully. "I thought the whole school knew that. We found out a couple of years ago; you would have been in second year."

"Oh, that," Luna said airily. "I merely thought it was the usual useless gossip. I was quite disappointed when Professor Lupin left, he was an excellent teacher."

"Yes, we thought so," Hermione said dryly, closely followed by Harry's "You don't mind that he's a werewolf?"

"Oh no," said Luna. "I find it fascinating. Is he really just a werewolf or is he actually a Garou?"

Harry was about to answer when Hermione interrupted. "A Garou? There have been no recorded instances of a lycanthrope also being a Garou. They're myths."

"Not necessarily," Luna responded calmly. "Just because there are no recorded cases does not mean that they do not exist. I would imagine they are quite reviled, more so than a normal lycanthrope, and takes excellent steps in order to hide themselves."

Harry interrupted the two girls before they could get going. "Er, what exactly is a Garou?"

Hermione sighed. "A Garou is a lycanthrope that can transform at will at any time, not just the full moon."

"Oh, well, Remus definitely isn't one of those," Harry said firmly, trying to close the discussion. Hermione helped him by pouncing on the subject she had been quite eager to discuss.

"Harry, you haven't told us what you got for your O.W.L.S." she said, eliciting groans from Ron and Neville. "You have got them, haven't you?"

Harry grinned at her, he had been wondering exactly when she was going to ask. "Yeah, Professor McGonagall gave them to me a couple of nights ago. But tell me what yours were first."

Ron groaned. "Don't get her started," he said and then yelped when Hermione smacked him on the arm. Harry heard parchment being rustled and then an odd silence before Hermione cleared her throat.

"Er, well, I'll just tell you my results then, shall I?" she said a little uncomfortably. "Well, I got O's for everything except Astronomy and I got an E in that. Mind you, I think that it's totally unfair that they didn't make allowances for what happened during that exam." She would have gone on but Ron cleared his throat.

"Erm, I got an O in Defence, of course," Ron said proudly. "I got an E in Care of Magical Creatures, A's in Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Potions and History of Magic and I got a D in Divination. Mum was pretty pleased especially with my DADA result. Neville?"

Neville jumped. "Oh! Um, I got O's in Defence and Herbology," he said proudly. "I got an E in History of Magic and A's in Potions, Charms, Transfiguration, Divination and Care of Magical Creatures."

"That's great, guys!" Harry said, pleased that they'd all done well.

"Come on, Harry, your turn now," Ron demanded.

"Okay," Harry said. "Well, for what it's worth, I got an O in Defence, E's in Transfiguration, Charms, Potions and Care of Magical Creatures. I got an A in Herbology and, somehow in Divination and I got a D in History of Magic."

"What did you mean by 'for what it's worth'?" Hermione asked. "Those are quite good results."

"Because I won't be doing normal classes this year," he said in surprise. "I mean, how could I?"

Silence fell and Harry shook his head in exasperation. "Didn't you realise that's why Master Nhean is here?" he said. "He's my teacher now."

"What about the DA?" Hermione asked. "Will you still be able to take that?"

"More importantly," Ron said with dismay in his voice, "what about quidditch?"

Harry slumped in his chair, his good mood suddenly vanishing. It had only occurred to him the day before that he wouldn't be able to play quidditch any more and he had spent a couple of hours stomping, and sometimes stumbling, around the suite while he raved on about the unfairness of it all to Remus. His realisation that quidditch was now impossible for him had coincided with Professor McGonagall returning his Firebolt to him after his lessons with Master Nhean were over for the day and informing him that his ban had been lifted. He had been ecstatic for the couple of minutes it had taken for reality to sink in.

"I guess you'll have to stay on as Seeker, Gin," he said miserably. "You were pretty good last year."

The eight teenagers were still sitting with an air of gloom surrounding them when Remus crawled back through the entrance hole. He looked at them in surprise and then narrowed his eyes as he realised that the gloomy mood was particularly strong around the Weasleys and Harry. He sighed as he realised that the discussion must have got around to quidditch. As he stood there, unnoticed, Harry's head came up and swung around.

He frowned. "Remus? Is that you?"

"Yes," Remus replied in surprise, "how did you know?"

Harry broke out into a slow, pleased smile. "I...think I heard you breathing and...yes, I could smell you as well."

The twins immediately questioned Remus with mock concern about his bathing habits, getting a laugh out of everyone in the room.

"No, not that!" Harry said with amused exasperation. "It was just a mix of the aftershave Remus uses and...I don't know...just a distinct Remus smell. It's kind of hard to explain but Master Nhean did say this would happen. He said my other senses would start to compensate for the loss of my sight. He said the more time I spend around someone; the quicker I'll be able to recognise their scent and sound."

"Cool!" Ron said in awe. "What else will you be able to do?"

"Ron! Harry is not some sort of performing beast!" Hermione scolded.

"Mione! I didn't mean it like that!" Ron said defensively. "You knew that didn't you, Harry?"

Harry smothered his laughter and nodded in answer to Ron. Those two had just gotten worse over the summer, now they really sounded like an old, bickering, married couple.

Remus interrupted before Ron and Hermione could settle down into some serious bickering. "Time for dinner everyone." He walked over to where Harry was sitting and pulled Harry upright. He offered his arm and the group made their way out of Gryffindor Tower and down to the Great Hall.

Chapter 7

Lord Voldemort sat on his throne-like chair, silently waiting for his Death Eaters to appear. Bellatrix Lestrange sat on his right, her chair only slightly less elaborate, and Wormtail cringed to his left, his Mark having been used for the summoning. The first Death Eater appeared in mere seconds, with the last appearing some fifteen minutes after being summoned. Voldemort stood and pointed at the late-arriving Death Eater.

"Come forward and remove your mask," he ordered.

The Death Eater stepped forward and removed his mask to reveal an impassive face.

"Ahh, Severus," Voldemort hissed, "what excuse do you have for your lateness."

Severus bowed low and answered calmly. "I was in a meeting with the Headmaster and the other Heads of House, Lord. I had to come up with a reason to leave so abruptly."

Voldemort examined the excuse, looking for something wrong. "Hmm," he mused, "an acceptable excuse, I suppose. But, Severus, I must not make exceptions. Crucio!"

Voldemort held the spell for a few minutes, watching Severus writhe on the floor in pain with disinterest. He could hear Bellatrix's breath speed up behind him and he quickly removed the spell with a silent snarl.

"Rise, Severus and I hope you have an answer for me this time," he demanded. "Tell me, why is Harry Potter at Hogwarts?"

Severus rose shakily to his feet and brushed his hair out of his face. "My Lord, I have what I believe you will find to be good news," he said after a few deep breaths. "The Potter boy was brought to Hogwarts after receiving an extensive beating from his muggle relatives." Severus continued describing an exaggerated account of what had been done to Potter. "He is still recovering from this but that is not all, my Lord."

He and Dumbledore had spent many hours discussing what to tell the Dark Lord. He had been able to put things off once by saying that Dumbledore was allowing no-one to see Harry and he was unable to discover what was happening without bringing suspicion down on himself. But they had both known that he would have to say something at the next meeting. They had eventually decided that an exaggerated version of the truth would be best. They knew that the truth would eventually get out and therefore lying to Voldemort would only cause trouble to Severus.

Severus took a deep breath. "Potter has been blinded, my Lord."

Voldemort stared at him for a long moment, savage amusement slowly gathering on his face. He burst out laughing. "My great enemy

is blind?" he asked incredulously and Severus nodded. Voldemort leaned forward, his red eyes almost glowing. "And how is he dealing with this, my dear Severus?"

"Poorly, Lord," Severus said with contempt. "Though he is moving around somewhat, his mood is depressed and sulky." Severus paused and grinned viciously. "It was made worse when he finally realised that he would no longer be able to play quidditch."

"Excellent, excellent," Voldemort hissed. "This is spectacular news, Severus. I am most pleased with you. You will be rewarded." He rubbed his thin hands together. "Yes, this will take some thought. Leave me, all of you!"

The Death Eaters bowed and apparated away. Wormtail quickly scuttled out of the room but Bellatrix rose from her chair and approached her lord. She stood behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders.

"What are you going to do now, my Lord," she purred.

Voldemort whipped around and struck her across the face, knocking her to the floor. "Never touch me without permission," he snarled. "Crucio!" He watched as she convulsed with pain, then ended the curse. "Leave me, woman, before I give you worse."

Bellatrix picked herself up off the floor and strode out of the room without a backward glance, her back straight with brittle dignity.

Voldemort watched her go with a venomous expression. If he'd known that her time in Azkaban had driven her insane, he'd have left her there. Dismissing her from his thoughts, he turned his mind towards Harry Potter and began planning.

Snape apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and began the slow walk back to the castle, stripping off the outer Death Eater robe as he went. He folded it across his arm along with the mask and breathed in the crisp night air with relief. He had not expected his news to bring the meeting to an abrupt halt but he was glad of it. He had also managed to avoid being drawn into any of the amusements the other Death Eaters were planning by the expediency of saying that Dumbledore would be suspicious if he was gone long. He only hoped that he would be privy to whatever plan the Dark Lord came up with. He expected he would but his place was not completely assured. Hopefully the news he had delivered tonight would go a long way towards redeeming him in the Dark Lord's eyes. If he was very lucky, it would garner him entry into the Dark Lord's inner sanctum. Snape shivered, not entirely sure he wanted to be that close to the Dark Lord, no matter that it would offer the opportunity for better information.

He quietly opened one of the front doors and slipped silently into the Entrance Hall, closing the door behind him. He turned and was surprised to see Potter standing in a corner of the Hall. As he watched Potter suddenly stiffened and tilted his head to one side. He then tilted it backwards and sniffed, almost seeming to scent the air.

"Professor Snape?" he said with a frown.

Severus had been watching Potter, intrigued with his odd behaviour, and was startled when he was correctly identified. He stalked over towards the boy. "What are you doing out of bed, Potter?" he said suspiciously.

The frown cleared from Harry's face and he gave a cheeky grin. "You can't take points from Gryffindor, sir, it's not school time."

Snape sighed. "Answer the question, Potter."

The grin disappeared and a weary look replaced it. "...I saw it. The meeting," Harry said.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "I thought I told you to practice your Occlumency, Potter."

"I have been," Harry said indignantly and then settled down with a frown. "It was different this time. I knew this was a real vision. I...I don't really know how to explain it, sir, but this one just felt real. I tried comparing it to the vision of...of Sirius and it definitely felt different to that one." He sighed in exasperation. "I don't know if that means anything. I mean that was the memory of a vision. It's difficult to explain, sir, but I don't think Vol...er, You-Know-Who could do that to me again." He paused again as he tried to find the words he wanted. "I know! It felt not me, if that makes any sense. I could tell it wasn't anything from my mind."

Snape listened to this with growing surprise and listened to the end of it with a raised eyebrow and a pleased expression. "Very good, Potter," he said dryly. "You have finally realised what the purpose of your Occlumency lessons are."

Harry's jaw dropped at the unexpected compliment and Snape was forced to swallow a chuckle at the absolutely gormless expression that resulted from this. He settled for grinning, knowing that Potter wouldn't be able to see. He watched as Potter shook his head almost in disbelief and then frowned again.

"Sir?" Harry asked carefully. "Why did he do that? Punish you for being late? I mean, it was hardly your fault." His voice dropped to almost a whisper but Snape caught it anyway. "And it really hurt...both of us."

Snape flinched at this and grabbed Harry's arm in a tight grip. "What did you mean by that last comment, Mr Potter?"

Harry gasped, he hadn't meant for Snape to hear that one but he now knew better than to try and conceal what was happening. "When Vol...He casts Crucio, I can feel it as though it was being cast on me," he said reluctantly.

"And how would you know what the Cruciatus curse feels like?" Snape asked in surprise.

"The third task," Harry said with a shudder, "in the cemetery. He cast it on me then while I was tied up to his father's headstone."

Snape winced. Potter had felt the Cruciatus curse when he was only fourteen. He sighed, let go of Potter's arm and answered the boy's question. "He did that because he likes to encourage promptness. The last to arrive always suffers what you saw."

"That's a pretty stupid idea," Harry muttered in disgust causing Snape to snort in amusement.

"Go back to bed, Potter. And tell Lupin about the vision in the morning," Snape ordered as he turned towards the dungeons.

"Yes, sir," Harry said and waited until he heard the Potions Master head down towards the dungeons. He leaned back against the wall, letting the coolness seep into his skin. Tonight's vision had been a bit of a shock for him. The pain from the two Cruciatus curses had been bad enough but the shock of realising that he could recognise that the vision was external had somehow seemed greater. He'd known that he was making some progress with his Occlumency training but he hadn't realised exactly how far he'd gotten, particularly after the last few days. Since his breakdown outside the castle, he had felt that he wasn't making as much progress as he had been before. Admittedly it was hard to tell, as Snape wasn't exactly one for compliments.

He pushed away from the wall and started tapping his way back to the suite. He had decided to stay with Remus even though the others were in Gryffindor tower. Partly because he hadn't wanted to negotiate the entrance hole and the stairs until he was more confident

about moving around but mostly because he wanted to spend more time with Remus. He planned to go back to the tower when the school year started, as he didn't want to miss out on doing things with his friends. Since he wouldn't be taking classes with them, if he stayed in the suite he'd hardly see them.

He ran his hand lightly down the wall of the corridor, brushing the portrait frames until he got to the one that guarded the door to the suite and gave the password. The portrait swung open and he made his way into the living area and slumped down onto the couch. The vision had been a rude awakening tonight, particularly after going to bed so happy. The approval had come through from the Ministry about his guardianship. Although the Dursleys still had not been found, the Ministry had agreed that they could no longer act as his guardians and had approved the joint custody arrangement that Dumbledore had suggested. Remus had been ecstatic; Harry had never seen him smile so much and so widely. Harry couldn't imagine where the Dursleys had managed to hide but they'd certainly done a good job. He'd found over the last few days that he no longer cared about what happened to them. He had bigger and more important things to worry about. Oh, he still wanted them punished but he wasn't going to dwell on it. If nothing else, tonight's vision had reminded him of that.

Harry sighed and levered himself off the couch. He wandered into his room and sat on the edge of his bed. Shaking his head to dismiss the thoughts that had been consuming him, he leaned his cane against the bedside table and fumbled his way under the blankets. Just before he fell asleep, a final thought ran through his mind - he had actually felt sorry for that greasy-haired bugger tonight.

By mid-afternoon the next day, Harry was exhausted. His sleep after the vision and his talk with Snape had been poor and he had given up in disgust at about 6 am. Remus had found him slouched on the couch an hour later and had demanded to know why. Harry's explanation of the vision had lead to a breakfast meeting with Remus, Snape and Professor McGonagall in Dumbledore's office and then to the most intensive Occlumency lesson he had had since they restarted. Lunch had been a relief, joking around with the Weasley twins had improved his mood no end. That good mood had not lasted unfortunately, Master Nhean had been determined to continue the lesson that had been brought to an abrupt end by Harry's breakdown and they had once again made their way outdoors.

"I can't do this!" Harry yelled, almost frozen in fear. He hadn't made it much further than the last time before coming to a halt. This definitely wasn't like moving around the castle. Inside it was so much easier, he knew it so well and even if you did get lost, the portraits were usually pretty helpful. Not that he did get lost much, he'd been really surprised at just how well he had known the castle. When he'd actually had to stop and think about it, he knew that place. But the outside was different, it was almost impossible to tell where he was and that sent him into a panic.

"Harry, Harry, HARRY!"

Harry jumped and yelped, his heart racing. Master Nhean placed his hands on Harry's shoulders and forced him to sit on the ground. He sat down opposite the boy. "Calm down, Harry. Take a deep breath and just calm down."

Harry took in several deep breaths, managing to get his growing panic under minimal control.

"Good work," Nhean said soothingly. "Now just keeping taking those deep breaths and stay calm." He pitched his voice at a level that was almost hypnotic. "That's it, just keeping breathing in and out, in and out. I am here, I am not going anywhere, you are perfectly safe. Just keep breathing in and out."

About fifteen minutes later he cast an appraising eye over the boy in front of him and was pleased to see that the soothing words had taken effect. Harry was sitting calmly, breathing regularly and without panic.

"Feeling better?" he asked and Harry nodded. "Good. Now, I want to you to just listen. You've told me that your hearing has been getting more acute. So use it here. Listen and tell me what you hear."

Harry breathed in and out and let his head drop a little, his eyes closing reflexively. He kept himself calm and listened. "I can hear...birds singing, must be in the Forbidden Forest. I can hear the wind rustling the leaves." His breathing slowed as he concentrated. "I...can hear you breathing, but only just. I can hear...yes, I can hear laughing, but very faintly. It...sounds like Fred and George."

"What direction is the laughing coming from?" Nhean asked softly.

"It's coming from...from my left," Harry paused and listened harder. "Yes, my left which means they're probably at the quidditch pitch."

Nhean kept his voice calm and quiet. "Do you know how to get to the quidditch pitch from here?" Harry nodded and Nhean stood. He grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him smoothly to his feet making sure to not disturb his concentration. "Can you lead me there?"

Harry nodded again and started walking slowly towards the sound of laughing. He had to concentrate fairly hard, the wind was blowing and it made it a little difficult to track the noise. It got easier as he got closer; the noise becoming clearer.

"Hey, Harry!" Fred yelled and Harry jumped, his concentration broken. "Whatcha doing here?"

"I...er, I don't know," Harry stammered.

The twins laughed and suggested that perhaps the small man behind him might know.

Master Nhean laughed. "Perhaps I might. Now scram, you two. Some of us actually need to do productive work."

"We are wounded," said Fred or George.

"Definitely wounded," said George or Fred. "We shall strategically retreat."

Harry heard the twins walk away, chattering to each other and he turned around. Nhean chuckled. "I do like those two. Now Harry, what do you think?"

"I...I...don't know," Harry said again. "How did I get here?"

"You got here because you knew where it was, just like you know where things are inside the castle," Nhean said benignly. "You just needed to concentrate on that, not on the fact that it's so open out here. You followed the sound of the laughing and you were able to do that because you knew where it was coming from."

Harry's mouth dropped open as the memory of how he had gotten to the quidditch pitch came back and Master Nhean chuckled. "Do you think you could get back to the front door again?"

Harry shook his head to clear it and nodded slowly, a grin forming on his face. He lead his diminutive teacher back to the front door, his weariness disappearing. Nhean stopped him at the door.

"Now I don't want you experimenting with moving around outdoors on your own just yet. I know you have gained a certain amount of confidence just now but remember, there are no portraits to help you

out here and, for safety's sake, I do not think you should be wandering around outside alone."

Harry sighed and nodded. "Okay, Master. Would it be alright if it were with Ron and Hermione and the others?"

Nhean thought about this for a moment. "Only if there are at least two others with you. I would prefer that if you come out here without an adult that it is with a larger group though."

Nhean ushered Harry back into the Entrance Hall and they went back to the classroom that had been given over to them for the year.

"Now that I have managed to convince you that you will be able to move around outside, I would like to start on another exercise."

Harry groaned. "Another one? But I'm still working on moving around inside with and without my cane, getting used my improving senses, improving my memory and now getting used to moving around outside."

"I know, I know," Nhean said soothingly. "It is true that I am pushing you through the basics as quickly as possible but I think it is necessary. Your nemesis has a great advantage over you just now and I would like to narrow that advantage as quickly as possible. Now this exercise is quite a simple one and will tell me precisely how far along your developing senses are just now. It may or may not work."

"Okay," Harry sighed, "I suppose I don't have much choice, do I?"

Nhean chuckled and steered Harry over to a seat in front of a table. "Okay Harry, I want you to close your eyes and try and get into the light trance state I've been teaching you the last few days."

Harry closed his eyes and started the calm breathing pattern he had been taught. This had actually been one of the easier exercises he had learnt due to its similarity to his mind-clearing exercise for Occlumency and he very quickly dropped into a light trance.

Nhean moved over to one of the small chests along the outer wall. He opened a black one and took out a crystal orb and a silver stand. He placed the stand on the table in front of Harry and placed the orb on top. He held one hand over the orb and concentrated for a moment, speaking a few soft words. The orb pulsed and glowed softly and Nhean stood back and shifted into Oversight. This was the true mark of the Night Warrior and could normally only be developed by those who were blind. There were rare sighted people who were capable of Oversight and the Guild was always searching for them. Guild Trainers like himself needed Oversight in order to properly train the Warriors. While the orb only glowed softly to normal sight, in Oversight it was shining brightly. Nhean didn't think that Harry would have developed his Oversight just yet but considering the boy's ability with Defence Against the Dark Arts, he thought it was best to check. Oversight technically fell into the category of Defence.

"Now, when I tell you I want you to open your eyes," Nhean said and Harry nodded slowly. The Night Master checked that the orb was still

shining brightly in Oversight and turned back to Harry. "Open your eyes."

Harry opened his eyes. "Whoa!" he yelled and lurched backwards, tipping his chair over and falling in a heap on the floor. The entire time his eyes were glued on the orb and he barely seemed to notice what had happened. Nhean watched him and shook his head. He should have known; when it came to Defence, Harry was definitely an over-achiever. While Harry was by no means the quickest at developing Oversight, he was definitely right up there. Nhean knelt beside Harry and placed a hand on his shoulder. Harry turned to look at him and started in surprise at the usual blackness. He whipped his head back towards the table and the glowing orb again and a look of wonder crept onto his face. Nhean helped him up and he walked slowly over to the table. He ran his hand over the orb in fascination.

He slowly turned around. "Master? What just happened?" he asked in a whisper.

"Your Oversight is starting to develop," Nhean said with a smile. "All blind people develop it but most never learn how to use it. It requires a spell to be truly effective and that is the great secret of the Guild of the Night. The first Night Warrior, a man by the name of Ishii Sato, developed the spell nearly two thousand years ago and he established the Guild. At first he only trained the blind but then he met Hiroko Watari. They became friends and one night Sato told Watari about the spell he had developed and the fledgling Guild. He wanted Watari's advice. Watari was a samurai and Sato felt that there was much he could learn from him. Watari spoke the spell and was startled when he too was able to see using Oversight. For there are a very few sighted people who also develop it. The Guild spends a great deal of time finding them and convincing them to become trainers."

Nhean stood silent for a moment. "Harry, I cannot put this off any longer. It is an absolute requirement that before we train anybody in the use of Oversight, they must be a Guild member. I cannot make an exception for you."

Harry stared for a moment and then a slow smile grew on his face. "I've don't have any problems with that, Master," he said. "I kind of figured this might happen."

"Are you sure, Harry?" Nhean pressed.

"Of course," Harry said easily, then hesitated. "Unless there's some deep, dark secret you're not telling me."

Nhean laughed. "No, no, nothing like that. It's just that the Guild may call on you in the future and you will have to respond. You can deny a request from anyone other than the Guild."

Harry considered this and nodded. "That makes sense. I mean you're putting all this effort into training me and telling me closely guarded secrets, it only makes sense that there would have to be some kind of payback at some point. I don't have a problem with that, Master."

"Good," Nhean sighed in relief. "I had hoped you would see it that way. Now, there is a little ceremony involved in joining the Guild and you are permitted to have three witnesses attend part of it. There will

be one section that they will not be permitted to see but the rest is fine. Who did you want to come?"

"Remus, Ron and Hermione," Harry said without hesitation.

"Very well. I think we should do this tonight. I had not expected you to develop your Oversight so quickly but now that you have we must start getting it trained. Go and let your three witnesses know about tonight. We'll conduct the ceremony here at 8 o'clock."

Harry nodded and Nhean ended the spell. The glow faded from the orb and Harry made a disappointed sound.

"Don't worry, Harry. You'll learn how to do that yourself soon enough," Nhean said with a smile. "I know you have questions but they will have to wait until after the ceremony. Now go and inform your witnesses."

Harry sighed and left the room. Nhean picked up the orb and stand and put them away. He turned towards a large chest he had tucked under a table in the corner. With a flip of his wand he pulled it out and settled it on top of the table. He opened it and started pulling out the things he would need for tonight's ceremony.

"So what's going to happen at this thing tonight," Ron asked.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Remus were walking along the corridor towards Nhean's classroom. It was ten minutes to eight and Harry was more than a touch nervous.

"It's a ceremony to admit me to the Guild of the Night," he said with some asperity. This was the fourth time Ron had asked that question.

"I know that," Ron said, "but what are you going to have to do? And what do we have to do?"

"I don't know on both counts," Harry said. "I don't think you guys have to do anything though. I think you're just there as witnesses."

Remus laid a hand on Ron's shoulder. "Enough, Ron. I think Harry's nervous enough as it is."

Harry nodded as the four of them came to halt in front of the classroom door. Master Nhean was waiting in the doorway, wearing the most elaborate robes that any of the sighted members of the party had ever seen him wear. They were black with intricate markings embroidered in silver and crimson. He had in his hands a cane remarkably similar to Harry's and with the light from the classroom at his back; he looked both wise and strong.

"Welcome, Harry Potter," he said solemnly. "Welcome, witnesses. Please enter."

The four entered and Master Nhean indicated to Remus, Ron and Hermione where they were to stand. He guided Harry to his place in front of a table and looked around to see that everything was ready. The room looked very different to its normal appearance. All of the tables and chairs had been cleared out except for one table and Master Nhean's chests had been covered with black velvet. Candles glimmered everywhere and incense burned in one corner, filling the air with the scent of sandalwood. On the table lay a goblet filled with a shimmering silver liquid and another filled with a dark red wine. A small gold knife lay between the two goblets and in front of these items lay a ring and chain of white gold. The chain had a small charm attached to it. Master Nhean stood behind the table and faced Harry.

"Welcome all to the Initiation Ceremony of Harry James Potter," he intoned. "Would the witnesses please state their full names?"

"Remus Julius Lupin."

"Ronald Bilius Weasley."

"Hermione Jane Granger."

"Thank you." Master Nhean inclined his head towards the three witnesses. "The Guild of the Night is an ancient and honoured

association established long ago to aid those in need and to fight the Dark forces that exist in our world. To be a Night Warrior is a great honour but also a great responsibility. It requires a pure heart and a kind soul. It also requires dedication and selflessness. A Night Warrior fights not for his own selfish purposes but to aid those that cannot or are unable to fight. A Night Warrior is also one who has faced a great personal challenge. For all Night Warriors are blind, facing the world without sight, in a darkness that is absolute. And yet each and every one has overcome this challenge and become stronger than they were before. Has become a Warrior not just in name but in fact. Before me stands one who would take the first steps on this path."

Nhean turned to face Remus, Ron and Hermione. "Witnesses, please take your place behind the postulant."

As they lined up behind Harry, Master Nhean picked up the goblet containing the silver liquid. He walked over to Remus and held the goblet out to him.

"Remus Julius Lupin, you stand here as witness to this ceremony on behalf of the postulant. State your relationship to him and why you believe he should be permitted entry to the Guild, then take the goblet and drink."

"I am Harry's guardian," Remus said firmly. "I believe Harry should be permitted entry to the Guild because he...he has a pure heart and a kind soul. Because he already is a warrior for the Light. Because I can think of no more deserving future for him." Remus' eyes welled and he blinked back those tears. He took the goblet out of Master Nhean's hand and, after eyeing the silver liquid suspiciously for a moment, he drank, trusting that Master Nhean would not use

anything that would harm him. Master Nhean took the goblet back from him with a small smile indicating he understood Remus' hesitation and moved to stand in front of Ron.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, you stand here as witness to this ceremony on behalf of the postulant. State your relationship to him and why you believe he should be permitted entry to the Guild, then take the goblet and drink."

Ron gulped nervously. "Harry's my best friend and I guess he's also kind of my brother now. I think he should be allowed in because he deserves it and he needs every bit of help he can get and his friends can't always give that help. I don't know why Vol...Voldemort keeps coming after him but he does and we won't always be there to help Harry. And..." Ron paused and said with a rush, "And he deserves this! It's about time something went right for Harry 'cause nothing much does." Master Nhean smiled kindly at Ron as he took the goblet and drank from it. He handed the goblet back and Master Nhean stood in front of Hermione.

"Hermione Jane Granger, you stand here as witness to this ceremony on behalf of the postulant. State your relationship to him and why you believe he should be permitted entry to the Guild, then take the goblet and drink."

Hermione drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "Harry's my best friend as well. I believe he should be permitted entry into the Guild because...I know of no finer person than Harry. He is brave, kind, selfless, funny, in all ways a good friend, even when he's driving us crazy. He always does what he thinks is best and his loyalty to his friends and those that he loves cannot be questioned." Hermione stopped and her voice became choked. "He would die for us, for

those he loves, without hesitation." She stumbled to a halt and took the goblet from Master Nhean. He watched her drink with shining eyes and took the goblet when she handed it back.

He moved to stand in front of Harry. "You have heard the words of your witnesses, Harry James Potter. Now tell me why we should permit you entry to the Guild of the Night."

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. The words of his friends had moved him in ways he hadn't thought possible. "I wish to be permitted entry to the Guild because I need to be. I am the only one who can kill Voldemort." He heard gasps from Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, he will kill...many. He will kill the muggle-born and muggles, he will kill anyone who opposes him and I...cannot let him do that. He has already killed and maimed too many. He must be destroyed and I cannot do that without the help of the Guild...and my friends."

Nhean pressed the goblet into Harry's hands and he drank from it, the silver liquid cool and smooth as it ran down his throat. Nhean took the goblet back and walked back behind the table. He put the goblet down and picked up the golden knife.

"We have heard the words from the postulant and his witnesses. Now we shall see the truth of them." Nhean muttered a quiet word and used the knife to prick his finger. He allowed three drops of his blood to fall into the silver liquid remaining in the goblet. He closed his eyes and muttered a second word and heard Harry, Ron, Hermione and Remus gasp. All five of them were now seeing the same images in their minds. Images of Harry's actions throughout his time at Hogwarts. The images flashed through their minds for about five minutes and then they were all released. The liquid in the goblet glowed with a bright light for a moment and when that light faded, the

colour of the liquid was now a deep crimson, flecked strongly with gold. Nhean smiled and his eyes filled with triumph. Had the liquid turned to a gold colour, it would have indicated that Harry's strength lay in physical fighting. If it had turned a pure crimson colour, it would have indicated that Harry's strength would lie in the casting of magic. But this combination of the two colours indicated that Harry would be strong in both; the best possible outcome.

"So mote it be," Nhean said with pride. "The postulant stands with his entry confirmed. Welcome to the Guild of the Night, Harry James Potter." He turned his attention to the witnesses. "Would the witnesses please leave the room for just a moment?"

Remus nodded and led Ron and Hermione out of the door. Nhean walked around the table and picked up the chain and the knife.

"Hold out your hand," he ordered and Harry obeyed. "You are now a Guild Member, with all the privileges and responsibilities that that entails. Your oaths must now be made. These are private things, known only to you and, as your trainer and sponsor, to me. They are not to be spoken of to others, not even fellow Guild Members." Harry nodded and in a quick movement, Nhean grabbed his wrist and slashed open a shallow wound in the palm of his hand, placing the charm on the chain in the middle of it. Harry gasped and froze, his eyes wide. After a moment he began to speak.

"I swear an oath of allegiance to the Guild and my fellows. I swear it by my blood and my heart. Never shall my loyalty be in doubt. I swear an oath to guard, guide and protect all those that need such things and for this oath the Guild shall stand at my side, giving to me all that I need."

Harry swayed and breathed deeply for a moment. The charm glowed softly and Nhean could see the wound heal beneath it and the blood was drawn into it. When Harry's hand was completely healed and all the blood gone, he picked up the chain and placed it around Harry's neck, tucking it under his shirt so that it was hidden from view. He picked up the ring from the table and placed it onto Harry's still outstretched hand.

"The charm holds your oath, Guild Member. Take this ring and wear it as symbol of your new role."

Harry shakily slid the ring onto the third finger of his right hand and Nhean walked over to let Harry's witnesses back into the room. He indicated they should stand behind Harry and he took his place behind the table again.

"We welcome Harry James Potter as the newest member of the Guild of the Night. May he serve wisely and well."

Nhean picked up the goblet of wine and drank from it. He walked around the table and pressed the goblet into Harry's hands and urged him to drink. Harry took a small swallow of the wine and it seemed to settle him a little. Nhean took the goblet back and passed it to Remus, indicating he should drink and pass it to Ron. When the three witnesses had drunk, Nhean reclaimed the goblet and placed it back on the table. He relaxed and conjured up a chair for Harry, who was still looking a little shell-shocked.

"Come, Harry, sit down," he said with a chuckle. "I think you need to."

Harry gave a wan laugh and collapsed into the soft chair. "I think you're right," he said a little dazed.

Remus crouched down beside the chair and placed a hand on Harry's arm. "Alright there, Harry?"

"Yeah, Remus, I'm okay," Harry said. "It was just...I guess I wasn't expecting that."

"Me neither," Ron said emphatically. "But, mate, it was worth it, wasn't it?"

"Definitely," Harry said firmly.

Master Nhean smiled benignly. "Good. Now, I think you three should take Harry back to his room. Sleep would be the best thing for him right now and for the three of you as well. Off you go." He flapped his hands at them in a shooing motion until they pulled Harry up out of the chair and escorted him out of the room.

Chapter 8

Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall sat with the Headmaster in his office, drinking tea and waiting for the arrival of Remus Lupin and Master Nhean. Remus was the first to arrive; they heard him trudging up the stairs but were surprised to find a tired but quietly elated look on his face. He sat down in his usual chair and nodded in acceptance to the offer of a cup of tea.

"Everything alright, Remus?" Minerva asked with interest.

The werewolf smiled broadly. "Couldn't be better," he said but refused to elaborate, merely saying that it was Master Nhean's place to say any more. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at that statement and he smiled into his cup of tea.

Master Nhean entered a few minutes later and managed to surprise everyone in the room except for Remus and the Headmaster. He was still wearing his elaborate ceremonial robes and neither Minerva nor Severus had seen him in anything other the plain robes he favoured.

"From your attire, might I assume that something fairly significant has happened," Dumbledore asked with a smile.

Nhean sat and accepted his tea and sipped it with appreciation. He smiled in satisfaction. "Why yes, Albus, you might assume that."

Minerva and Severus stared at the tiny Master with surprise and then shifted that look to Remus when they saw his proud smile.

Master Nhean chuckled. "Shame on you, Albus. Keeping them in suspense in this manner." He turned to the two confused members of the gathering. "Harry was inducted into the Guild tonight and it went rather well."

Remus looked at him with curiosity. "I noticed you were quite pleased by the..." He groped for the words he was looking for. "The colour of the liquid in that goblet but I'm afraid I don't understand the significance."

Nhean smiled with delight. "My dear Remus, I was overjoyed. I must admit after what Albus told me I had expected something remarkable from Harry and I find that my expectations were fulfilled. You no doubt noted the colour of the liquid? Crimson and gold. That particular part of the ceremony tells the trainer where the postulant's strengths are going to lie. The majority of potential Warriors fall into one of two categories. Their strengths lie either in the martial arts or they lie in the magical arts. Perhaps only a bare ten percent of postulants show that mixed colour. It means that their strengths will lie in both fields and those strengths will be equal. Harry shows great promise." He finished with a pleased satisfaction in his voice.

The Headmaster and Professor McGonagall exchanged pleased and proud looks and Dumbledore clapped his hands together.

"Excellent! Most excellent!" He paused and eyed the Night Master and the werewolf with concern. "Has there been any repeat of the breakdown that Harry had?"

Nhean and Remus exchanged glances and Nhean indicated for Remus to go first.

"No, Headmaster, though he has had his bad days." Remus sighed. "The day he realised that he would no longer be able to play quidditch was particularly bad." He shook his head at the memory of seeing Harry's distress; the boy had truly loved playing the sport. "We made an agreement that we wouldn't keep things from each other any more, that if we were unhappy or something odd happened to either of us, we would tell the other. I thought it best to do it that way. Harry is not a boy anymore, Headmaster. He's a young man now and I thought it might be best to start treating him that way. He has been telling me how he feels." Remus paused and gave a small, odd-sounding laugh. "I'd never truly realised how much he was keeping from us. Did you know that he never told you how he was being treated by the Dursleys because he didn't think it was that important compared to everything else that was going on?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes, a look of deep sadness settling on his face. Remus saw it and immediately regretted the question. He decided to remove the expression as best he could.

"Of course," he said with a grin reminiscent of his days as a Marauder, "I also found out about some of his escapades during his years here at Hogwarts."

Eyebrows went up all around the room and Remus gave wicked laugh.

"I don't suppose you'd care to share?" Minerva asked dryly.

"Erm, perhaps not," Remus said with a grin. "Maybe I'd better wait until Harry has finished school before I do that. I wouldn't want him to be in detention for the rest of his life after all."

Snape sneered with sardonic amusement in his eyes while the other laughed.

Remus sobered. "In all seriousness, Albus, Harry's getting there. He hasn't completely adjusted nor has he really gotten over Sirius' death. Only time can take care of that but he's not hiding things from me anymore and I think that's a major step in the right direction. He'll be alright in time."

"Good," Dumbledore said and turned to Snape. "Now, Severus, you have something to report."

Snape grimaced. "I received an owl from Pettigrew this afternoon hence my calling this meeting. The Dark Lord has asked me brew a number of potions for him. He has asked for Veritaserum as well as a number of...the...more dubious potions I have developed for him over the years."

Albus' face took on a grim expression. "How long?"

"I have some of them on hand but the Veritaserum will take me a month to brew and..." He paused. "...one of the other potions will take me three months to brew. We have that long at least." He stopped again and considered the last night's meeting. "If all goes well, I should know more about what is happening this time. The Dark Lord did say he would 'reward' me for the information I had. He rarely goes back on those rewards...even if you do not wish to be rewarded. I suspect I will be permitted limited access into his inner sanctum." Snape's face became closed and his shoulder hunched slightly.

"Thank you, my friend," the Headmaster said softly. "I know that you would prefer to merely report to me but I think under the circumstances it is important that all of us here know what you are about."

Snape gave a small nod, his expression shuttered.

"Good! Now, unless anyone has anything further they need to add to the discussion, I would say that this meeting is over," Dumbledore said.

Nhean placed his cup down and looked at the Potions Master. "Actually I do have request to make of Professor Snape." Snape paused in the act of rising and sat back down. He raised an enquiring eyebrow. "I wish to start Harry on his potions work in the next few days. It's fairly basic to start with but will gradually get more intensive. Do you have a spare laboratory that we could work in? I do not wish

to use your main teaching classroom nor do I wish to disturb you by using a room that you have set up for your own projects."

Snape stared at him. "Potter will be making potions?" he asked with an odd tone. "He is blind. How is this possible?"

"Potion ingredients and potions have their own unique odours, do they not?" Nhean said in surprise. "Surely you judge the progress of your potions partly by their odours?" Snape nodded and then frowned. Nhean read his expression. "Yes, I know, not all changes in a potion are judged by scent. Eventually Harry will learn to make potions by feel, so to speak but that is a long time in the future. He may never reach that stage." Nhean shrugged. "Many Warriors do not brew potions but most are capable of at least the basic ones."

"May I sit in on these lessons?" Snape asked, intrigued.

"Certainly," Nhean replied and Dumbledore's twinkle became more pronounced.

Remus hung back as the others left. "Are you sure that's wise?" he asked Dumbledore softly as he watched Snape and Nhean leave.

Dumbledore smiled serenely. "Trust in Master Nhean, my boy."

Remus eyed the Headmaster with some doubt but finally nodded and left the office.

Harry tapped his way into the Guild classroom, as he had come to think of it, the next morning. His Occlumency lesson had gone well and he and Remus had talked late into the night about the ceremony. As a result his mood as he walked into the classroom was rather good. He stopped and listened, then scented the air. He hadn't thought about what he looked like when he did that but that was what Remus said he looked like; a wolf scenting for his prey. What filled his nose now was mostly sandalwood, probably left over from the night before, but underneath it he could smell the distinctive scent that he knew came from Master Nhean. He listened carefully and just barely heard the Night Master's breathing.

Now realising that this was a test, he swung his head gently from side to side to try and isolate where the noise was coming from. When he thought he knew, he walked slowly over to the corner of the room until the end of his cane lightly brushed the feet of his Master.

"Well done, Harry," said Nhean with amusement. "Now that we've established that you're far too clever for an old man like me, I'm sure you have questions about last night."

Harry laughed. "Oh, I think you're still waaay ahead of me in the cleverness stakes, Master. And yeah, I did have a few questions."

Nhean guided Harry to one of the comfortable chairs he had had placed in the room and the two of them settled in. He summoned a house elf and ordered tea for the two of them. The house elf bowed and disappeared, reappearing shortly afterwards with the tea and biscuits. Nhean thanked the elf and set them both up.

"Now, Harry," he said, settling back into the chair, "what did you want to know?"

"I...guess I just want to know a little more about what happened last night. I didn't realise the witnesses had to do that. What was all that about? And what was the whole thing with the visions of some of the things I've done here about?" Harry paused. "And why was your voice full of so much elation after that?"

Nhean chuckled. "Well, your first lot of questions are all related to each other, so that wasn't a bad start. Yes, I know your witnesses came in a little unprepared for that but that was necessary. Their answers must be honest and from the heart, as they were last night."

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice a little choked.

"Yes, it can be a little overwhelming for the postulants to hear just what their witnesses think of them," Nhean said kindly. "The liquid in the goblet is related to the magic used in pensieves. It draws out the memories of the witnesses and the postulant of the activities of the postulant. Basically, to enable a judgement to be made of the suitability of postulant and his or her strengths and weaknesses. The

liquid then reflects those strengths and weaknesses and lets the trainer know which path the postulant will take." Nhean paused and then continued, his voice reflective. "There are three paths that a Night Warrior can take, two of which are easier than the third. The two easier paths are those of pure magic, much like the path you would have taken had your education continued along its normal way here at Hogwarts, and that of the martial arts, almost pure fighting ability with weapons and unarmed combat. The third path, which is the more difficult and the less common, is that of what was originally known as the Warrior-Mage. A combination of both the martial arts and magic. These days the Guild doesn't use the title much; we're far more egalitarian now. All are called Warriors. No matter which path they take."

"So I guess I qualified for the third path, then," Harry said.

"Yes, indeed. It won't be an easy path to follow, Harry, but it will be worthwhile. The Warriors who follow that path tend to be the stronger ones; more capable of handling the unusual and the powerful."

Harry gave a humourless laugh. "Well, that'll be useful, all things considered."

Nhean considered his young apprentice in silence for a time. "Harry, I am aware that there is a prophecy that concerns you," he said carefully. "Albus told me the first part of it on the day I arrived but he did imply that there was more to it than that. Your reaction now and what you said last night supports that idea. Will you tell me what the remainder of the prophecy says?"

Harry sighed and buried his head in his hands. "It says that I'm the only one who can kill Voldemort and one of us has to kill the other," he said, his voice muffled. He raised his head and Nhean was startled by the terrible look in his blind eyes. "Kill or be killed, Master. I have to become a murderer if I want to stay alive," Harry said in a dreary voice. "And I can't let him kill me. I wouldn't have to live in the world that resulted but my friends would. I...can't let that happen."

Nhean regarded Harry with dismay. "I am sorry, Harry. To have such a thing hanging over your head..." His voice trailed off and he thought for a moment. "That is not all that is bothering you about this, is it?"

Harry looked up towards his Master, a habit that he had been unable to break as yet, after all he couldn't see him. "Yeah," he said with a gusty sigh. "Cedric and Sirius are dead because of me. Well, okay, not wholly because of me but I played a part in their deaths and I was there to see them die." Harry stopped and seemed to struggle for words for a moment. "I don't want that to happen again! I didn't want my friends to come with me to the Ministry but they wouldn't listen to me. I don't want them to die and that's what's most likely to happen if they keep hanging around with me. And now you're going to include them in my training." Harry's voice dropped to a whisper. "I just want them to be safe and alive."

"You have some wonderful, loyal friends there. I envy you," Nhean said, much to Harry's surprise. Nhean chuckled and explained. "I know you want nothing more than to keep your friends safe but, Harry, whether or not they get involved is their decision, not yours. From what Albus has told me, Neville has suffered just as much as you at the hands of Voldemort, would you deny him the opportunity to fight, to gain his revenge? Your friend Hermione is a muggle-born witch, how long would she last under Voldemort's reign? Would you deny her the chance to fight for her future? The Weasley's are known to be friendly towards muggles; they would suffer just as much as

Hermione. Would you also deny them the chance to fight for a better future? And Luna, would you throw her decision back into her face?"

"I...hadn't thought about it like that," Harry admitted reluctantly.

"I also think that you need not take so much onto yourself when it comes to the deaths of Sirius and Cedric. Look at it logically for a moment. Remus has told me a little about what happened during the third task. Did you force Cedric to take the cup?"

"No."

"Of course not. Think about what would have happened if Cedric had taken the cup on his own. Apart from the obvious conclusion that Voldemort would have been furious, would it have changed anything for Cedric? Probably not, I doubt Voldemort would have killed him outright like that. He quite probably would have used him in that ritual. In that case, Voldemort would be resurrected, Cedric would still be dead, for there would have been no Priori Incantatem to save him, and nobody would know. That of course assumes that the false Moody would have allowed Cedric to take it on his own. The only way Cedric could have lived is if you had denied your own nature and selfishly taken the cup for yourself. But that is not your way; after all, you did not even want to be in the Tournament in the first place. Truly, Harry, I do not see how things could have ended any other way with both of you following the paths your personalities put you on."

"I never thought about it that way," Harry said, thinking hard. "I guess you could be right."

"Now let's consider Sirius." Harry flinched as Nhean continued. "I can understand why Sirius did what he did. I do not think I could stay cooped up in a rather dreary house like the one Remus described to me. And I rather think I would have reacted like Sirius in such a situation. I cannot fault him for his actions."

"But he only died because I was so stupid!" Harry half-yelled.

"Yes and no," Nhean said after some consideration. "Yes, there was a certain amount of stupidity in your reaction to the vision. There were many other options available to you that you chose not to take. But Sirius must bear his share of the responsibility and stupidity as well. When the Order found out that you had gone to the Ministry in response to the vision, he could have chosen to stay at Headquarters. In fact I believe he was urged to do so. He made the choice to ignore those orders, Harry, not you." Nhean paused, not entirely sure how Harry was going to react to his next statement. "And to be honest with you, Harry, I'm not entirely sure that things didn't work out for the best."

"What?" Harry exploded.

"Calm down, Harry, and hear me out," Nhean said sternly, surprising Harry into listening. "I wasn't talking about Sirius' death; I was talking about the general events that occurred. Now, Voldemort desperately wants to get his hands on that prophecy, not to mention you. From what I have heard of the visions you had throughout the last school year, he was trying damn hard to get you there." Nhean laughed. "You must have frustrated him no end. He was undoubtedly hoping you would try and find out where that corridor was and instead you

just fundamentally ignored the vision and even got annoyed that they weren't moving faster. It took something fairly major to get you moving and even then you didn't do what he wanted. Harry, think! Voldemort wanted you in the Department of Mysteries so that you could get the prophecy for him but I have no doubts that he wanted you there alone. Then he and the Death Eaters he brought with him could easily overcome you, force you to get the prophecy for him and then kill you. But you didn't go alone, you brought your friends with you; friends you had been training in Defense all year. And you succeeded; Voldemort did not get the prophecy and now never will, he lost all but one of the Death Eaters he brought there to students and he was seen by Ministry officials thus making sure that the Ministry could no longer deny that he is back. He was also forced into a confrontation with Albus, something he has gone to a lot of trouble to avoid and he enabled you to discover a little of the power you have. Yes, a heavy price was paid but things worked out heavily in our favour in spite of that."

Harry sat back and thought about what Master Nhean had just said. He had to admit that there was a fair amount of truth in it. He and the others had done a stellar job of dealing with the Death Eaters and there was some satisfaction in knowing that Voldemort could not easily find out about the prophecy now. He also began to suspect that if they had managed to get out of the Ministry with only the injuries that had occurred and without Sirius dying they would all be quite elated, counting the whole thing as a great success and possibly a grand adventure.

"I...you're right," he said heavily. "I...hadn't been able to think past Sirius to see any of that."

"There was no reason that you should have," Nhean said kindly. "Though I rather think you would have eventually."

"Well, you never know," Harry said with somewhat morose humour, "I can be quite thick about things like that."

Nhean chuckled and decided to change the subject. Harry would need time to mull over all of the things they had just talked about. "Now, what other questions did you have?"

Harry was a little startled at the change in tack but went with it. "Erm, let me think. Oh yeah!" Harry paused and a curious and slightly apprehensive expression crept across his face. "Those oaths," he shivered a little.

"Mmm, that part of the ceremony is always a little disconcerting," Nhean said with understanding. "The charm is spelled to draw from you oaths that have meaning for you. Generic oaths tend to have a little wiggle room in them for those that wish to violate them. Personal oaths are far more binding. The Guild had some problems in its early days with generic oaths and the ceremony was changed to make things more personal. It also makes sure that the oaths are ones that each individual can live with. Those were your oaths, from your heart, mind and beliefs. That is why they are considered private and are not spoken of to others."

"Oh, okay," Harry said. "It was just a really weird sensation, that's all. So when do I start learning all this new stuff?"

"Well, considering the time I think we should try lunch first but I think we will wait a little bit for some of it. I want you to be able to move

around easily before we start doing any weapons works or physical training. We should be able to start some of the magical work this afternoon; you should probably learn how to do wandless magic as soon as possible. Oh, and Harry, I have a secret that I can tell you right now." Nhean grinned; he was interested to see Harry's reaction to this one. Harry raised an eyebrow and Nhean continued. "Slide your fingers up your cane until you find the little groove that runs around it."

Harry quickly located the little groove that ran around the circumference of the cane. He had discovered it shortly after getting the cane and had been wondering about it ever since.

"Found it? Good," said Nhean. "Now place your ring against the groove. It doesn't matter how, just as long as the ring and groove are touching. Now say the words: Solvo capulus."

Harry looked doubtful but placed his ring over the groove. "Solvo capulus," he repeated and was startled when there was a tiny click from his cane.

"Excellent!" Nhean said cheerfully. "Now grab the cane above the groove with one hand and leave the other below it. Now turn your top hand fractionally clockwise and pull."

Harry carefully followed his Master's directions and let out a startled oath when the top section pulled away with a metallic sound. He let go with his bottom hand and carefully felt in the gap between the two parts of the cane. He was surprised when his hand encountered cold steel. A few seconds of careful touching told him it was the blade of a

sword. He quickly pulled the sword free of its scabbard and gently ran his free hand along its length, taking care to not cut himself.

"Master?" he asked.

"Welcome to the Guild, Harry," Nhean said calmly. "A Night Warrior should always carry the appropriate weapon, don't you think?"

"Wow!" was all Harry could manage.

"We will start weapons work as soon as you are able," Nhean said. "Now put that thing away. Make sure you give that little twist again, anticlockwise this time. It engages the little spell that holds the sword firmly in its scabbard. That way you can still use it as a cane without worrying that it's going to come loose."

Harry fumbled the sword back into the scabbard and gave the little twist. He gave the cane a shake and was relieved to find that Master Nhean was right.

"Now let's go and eat, shall we?" Nhean said. Harry laughed and nodded and the two of them left the room.

The grey mist swirled obscuring everything. Grey seemed to be a theme; the ground was grey, what little that could be seen of the sky was grey and the mist, of course, was grey. The gaunt man with the shaggy, black hair who was stumbling through the grey land was heartily sick of it. He stopped and rubbed his chest where it ached.

"You'd think that if they were going to take away the need to eat and drink, they could at least take the pain away as well," he grumbled to himself and looked around.

Nothing.

Again.

He sighed and sat down, still rubbing his chest. He looked down the collar of his shirt and shuddered at the sight. The bruising was quite severe and was very slow in healing. He switched from rubbing his chest to scratching his head. If only he could remember how that had happened, he might be able to work out where he was. But he couldn't, in fact he couldn't remember much of anything. Not even his name. All he could remember were two faces. They were very similar and he would have thought that they were the same person except for the colour of the eyes. One face had hazel eyes; the other had brilliant green eyes.

He frowned as he concentrated, trying to remember whose faces they were. Eventually he sighed in frustration and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. He pushed himself to his feet and started walking again.

Maybe if he kept walking eventually he'd find someone or something that could help him.

Harry and Master Nhean returned to the classroom after lunch. Harry was eager to start work so Nhean threw off his top robe and pulled the orb and silver stand out.

"I think we will start with the spell I used yesterday," he said, setting things up. "If you are to see the results of your spell work you will need that one working first."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about asking that question," Harry said in surprise.

"Yes, I noticed," Nhean chuckled. "Well, to answer that question, the spell was created, as I told you yesterday, by Ishii Sato. It causes the magic fields that permeate every object in the world to be highlighted." Nhean paused and tried to think of an analogy. "I suppose you could say that it acts like a dye. Those with exceptionally strong Oversight can see this magic without the spell but most people, well, their Oversight isn't strong enough. Hence, the use of the spell. It also highlights magic when it is being used. It's quite useful as every spell looks, sounds and feels different to Oversight."

Nhean finished his setup and guided Harry over to the table.

"Now, locate the orb and hold your hand over it. Now the words to use are: Terasu shinzui kijutsu."

"Er, what were those words again?" Harry asked, startled at the strangeness of them.

"Terasu shinzui kijutsu," Nhean repeated.

Harry took a deep breath. "Terasu shinzui..." he trailed off. "Damn, I can't remember that last one!"

"Kijutsu," Nhean repeated. "Stay calm, Harry. I know the words are a little odd but they are just collections of syllables like any other words. Try again."

Harry nodded and took another deep breath. "Terasu shinzui kijutsu," he said firmly, hoping that he had gotten the pronunciation correct. He gasped and grinned when the orb lit up. He had gotten it right.

"Will I have to cast that spell at everything individually?" he asked as he stared at the globe of light he could now see.

"Good question," Master Nhean said. "No, you won't. I got you to isolate it this time to be sure you could cast it properly. Many Warriors cast the spell once and just leave it. I don't recommend that just yet. You really need to get used seeing the world like that before doing that permanently. You might as well see what I mean. End the spell."

"Er, how?" Harry asked.

"Oddly enough, any standard manner of ending a spell will work but only if used by the original caster so Finite Incantatem will do nicely."

"That's handy. And it's nice to know that other people can't just end it arbitrarily," Harry said with a smile. "Finite Incantatem." The orb stopped glowing.

"Sato worked hard to make sure that the spell couldn't be tampered with. He thought it would place his Warriors at a serious disadvantage if somebody could just whip the rug out from under their feet, so to speak," Nhean said with a grin. "Now step back from the table and try the spell again but don't direct it towards anything in particular."

Harry took a few steps back and cleared his mind. "Terasu shinzui kijutsu." He froze; the entire room had lit up and it was more than a touch overwhelming. He remembered what Master Nhean said about remaining calm and took a few deep breaths and slowly began to turn around, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It was when he got to where Master Nhean was standing that things began to fall into place. He couldn't see in the normal sense; there was no detail. What he could see was shapes formed by energy. The energy had different colours; sometimes it pulsed, other shapes were quiescent, in still

others it flowed. Some shapes had sounds associated with them. It wasn't audible sound; it seemed to echo inside his head. And he could begin to understand what Master Nhean had said about the 'feel' of magic.

He concentrated on the person-shape that was Master Nhean. The energy within him flowed and was a mix of brown and a golden-yellow colour with a distinct purple border. It had a soothing humming noise and Harry smiled; his Master was a soothing person to be around. It was then that he realised what had confused him at first. The walls of the classroom were pulsing with energy.

"How are you coping?" asked his Master.

"Okay. Though I can see why you have to get used to this. It's...a little strange," he said thoughtfully. His eyes were starting to hurt, which he thought was a bit odd, but it was the early warning signs of an oncoming headache that prompt him to end the spell. "Finite Incantatem."

"Head starting to hurt?" Nhean asked.

"Yeah." Harry paused. "I guess that's normal then."

"Yes. I suggest you head back to your room and get some rest. You will be very vulnerable to developing headaches at the start. You will get used to it after a while. Practice will help. Just remember to be careful practicing. If you use your Oversight in the wrong place, you

could burn yourself out temporarily. An hour's rest should do it at this stage." Nhean smiled. "Then I suggest you go and spend some time with your friends. You've haven't had much time to do that and no doubt they have some questions for you."

Harry grinned and made his way out of the room. He tapped his way back to the suite and into his room. He lay down on his bed and was asleep before he knew what was happening.

Chapter 9

Harry slowly came awake to the realisation that his bed was bouncing up and down slightly. Then he heard Ron speak.

"Come on, Harry! Wake up!"

Harry groaned. "What?"

"Come on, Harry! Its dinnertime," Ron said, bouncing on the bed again.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and sat up. "Geez, Ron, how old are you again?" he asked with exasperation.

Ron laughed and stopped bouncing. "Sorry, mate, but I'm hungry. You know Mum won't let us eat if you're not there."

"Whoa, wait, its dinnertime?" Harry asked, startled.

"Yeah. Why?"

Harry groaned. "I only meant to sleep for about an hour and then spend some time with you guys. Not sleep the entire afternoon."

"Don't worry," Ron said in an offhand manner. "We came in to see you when we heard you weren't doing any classes this afternoon but Prof...er, Remus looked in on you and said you were asleep. He said you'd been up talking for a fair while last night and that it might be best to let you sleep. He said we could all come around here tonight and pester the two of you."

Harry laughed and got up. "Sounds good to me," he said, pleased. "Come on, let's eat."

The two boys made their way down to the Great Hall, with Ron talking excitedly about the Cannons and their chances this year. They wandered into the Great Hall and sat down at the table. There had been a quiet division occur at the table. The adults sat slightly separated from the teenagers, allowing them to talk about whatever they liked. Often they were served slightly different dishes as well.

Harry and Ron's arrival signalled the appearance of the food. It had become an unspoken ritual for whoever was sitting next to Harry to describe what was on the table and put on his plate whatever he asked for. No one spoke about it or made an issue of it, not even any of the adults, for which Harry was grateful. His friends just seemed to think that it was the natural thing to do and he appreciated it. Tonight he decided on stew and bread and butter and, after a muttered thanks, started wolfing it down as soon as it was placed in front of him. When he had assuaged the worst of his hunger, he slowed down and started listening to the conversations going on around him. His friends noticed his attention and calmly included him in the

conversation. When they had all finished their meals, Ron was the first to speak up.

"Harry?" he asked quietly, after a quick glance at the adults. "I wanted...erm, well, how much can you tell us about last night?"

The other teenagers quietened and Harry turned his face towards them. "What did you want to know?"

"Well, as much as you want to tell us," Hermione said. "You can tell us, can't you?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, Hermione, I can. Except for that bit where you guys left the room. That bit is personal." He paused and tried to figure out where to start. "I'm sorry you guys were a bit unprepared for your part in it. Apparently that's normal, you're not supposed to know about that beforehand so that your responses are natural."

"You didn't know about it, did you?" Ginny asked, sternly.

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise and Hermione responded. "We told them, Harry. We didn't think it would be a problem. Master Nhean didn't say that we couldn't."

"It's okay, Hermione," he said with a grin. "I kind of figured you would. Ginny just sounded a lot like her mother there for a minute."

Everyone down their end of the table laughed and there were a few quickly hidden grins among the adults. "Anyway, no, I didn't know. That was as much of a surprise to me as it was to you."

"What about those visions though?" Ron said. "That was a little weird."

"Well, what we drank out of that goblet was something loosely related to the magic involved in pensieves. Those were our memories of things I've done over the last few years. It was a kind of judgement and testing of me."

"Did you pass?" Neville asked with quiet humour.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, you could say that. It showed Master Nhean how my training is going to go. I'm to be trained in both magic and fighting."

"I thought that was going to happen anyway," Ron said confused.

"Well, apparently it actually depended on what happened in the ceremony," Harry replied.

"You would have had basic training in the other school if you had only shown aptitude in one," Master Nhean interjected from further up the

table, confirming Harry's suspicion that the adults were listening intently to what was being said.

"Oh, okay," Harry said in surprise. "Anyway, that's what the ceremony was all about."

"Are we really going to be doing some training with you?" Ginny asked, excitement in her voice.

Harry grimaced and his shoulders slumped a bit.

"Yeah," he said unenthusiastically.

All of the teens looked at Harry and then at each other. Hermione's face became set and a hard glint came into her eye.

"Harry! We are not going to let you do this alone. We are your friends and we're going to help you, whether you like it or not!" she said angrily.

Harry sat silent, his head bowed. Finally he looked up, his expression sad but with a certain amount of humour. "Master Nhean was saying something along those lines earlier today." He sighed. "I just don't want you guys to get hurt or...killed."

"Now, ickle Harrykins," said one of the twins, Harry thought it was Fred. Over the last few days he had started noticing little differences in the twin's voices.

"Surely you should know that you can't keep us out of it," George completed.

"Yeah!" Ron agreed. "Especially when you remember how well we did at the Department of Mysteries."

"But you guys got hurt!" Harry exclaimed.

"Well, yeah," Ron admitted, "but, mate, if we'd let you go alone, you would have got killed!" Ron paused and tried to lighten things up. "And then we'd all have been dead, 'cause Mum would have personally strangled the lot of us." This statement garnered laughter from the teens and another round of smothered grins from the adults.

"Face it, Harry," Hermione said with a smile. "You made friends with us and now you're stuck with us."

Harry laughed and gave a genuine smile. "Thanks, Hermione."

"Yeah, mate," Ron said as he draped one arm over Harry's shoulders, "you're stuck with us now!" He paused and exchanged a look with

Hermione. "Harry? What did you mean when you said you were the only one who could kill You...er, Voldemort?"

Harry sighed. He'd forgotten that he'd let that slip during the ceremony. Everyone on the table was silent as he thought about what to say to them. Finally he decided on the truth. "Well, you know that the whole thing in the Department of Mysteries was about the prophecy?"

"The one that Neville dropped?" Hermione asked and Neville flinched and looked stricken. "Oh, sorry Neville. I didn't mean it that way!"

"Yeah, that's the one," Harry said, "and don't worry Neville, dropping that prophecy was probably the best thing you ever did."

Neville looked stunned. "What? Why?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Because now Voldemort can't get his hands on it," Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up even more. He wasn't sure whether he really should be telling Neville about this. He turned towards where the adults were sitting. "Professor Dumbledore?"

The Headmaster seemed to know exactly what he was asking. "You may tell them if you wish. Ultimately the prophecy is about you and you therefore have the final say on who knows. I will not repeat the mistakes I have made in the past."

Harry nodded and took a deep breath. "What the hell, I suppose you guys might as well know. I dragged you all the way to the Ministry last year so I suppose I owe you that much."

"Harry Potter!" Ginny said indignantly. "If I recall correctly you didn't drag us anywhere. We didn't give you a choice."

Harry laughed and then sobered. "Yeah, I know. Anyway, the prophecy wasn't lost. Professor Dumbledore was the one who originally heard the prophecy and he showed it to me. It's...well, this is the prophecy. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord has not and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

There was absolute silence from both ends of the table after Harry's little speech. Then Neville paled. "I...but I was born at the end of the seventh month too. It could be me!" He looked horrified.

Harry rushed to reassure him. "No, it's not Neville. It's me. It could have been you but Voldemort chose me."

Neville sighed and then looked a little shamefaced. "I...I don't know what to say. Part of me is..." his voice trailed off.

"You're glad it's not you but you wish it wasn't me as well," Harry said with a wry smile. "Yeah, I know, I've already thought that myself but the other way around." He paused. "Anyway, Voldemort knows the first part, about me being the one to have the power to vanquish him. That's why he keeps coming after me. But he doesn't know the last bit, about being marked as his equal and having a 'power the Dark Lord has not'."

"Yeah, what's that all about?" asked Ron.

"I don't know," replied Harry. "I haven't been told yet but I've got some ideas. I need to think about it some more."

"Harry?" Hermione said in a shaking voice. "The end..." She could not continue.

"Yeah, I know, Hermione," he said calmly. "One of us has to kill the other for all of this to be over."

"You're very calm about this," said Remus from up the table.

"Not really," he said with a weak grin, "but if I start thinking about it too much, it just starts to overwhelm me. I mean, I'm nearly sixteen, I'm blind. How, in Merlin's name, am I supposed to defeat Voldemort? He's got so much more experience than me, especially in the Dark Arts. How am I supposed to fight him?" Harry slumped down, a miserable look on his face. "And I don't really want to be a murderer, even if it is Voldemort."

Silence fell again and this time remained unbroken until one voice spoke up.

"I do not believe that will be a consideration, Potter," said Snape in a neutral tone. "The Dark Lord wishes you dead, he will not hesitate to attack. You will not be murdering him; you will be defending yourself. There is a difference."

Harry thought about that for a while and finally nodded his head, though his expression remained somewhat unconvinced. "Thank you, sir," he said and then hesitated. He looked in the direction of the Potions Master and opened his mouth. He quickly closed it again and shook his head with a frown.

Snape watched this with sardonic interest. Obviously the boy wished to ask him a question and he decided not to prompt him; wanting to see if the boy would have the courage to ask him outright whatever it was he wanted to know. He watched in amusement as the boy drew together his Gryffindor courage and opened his mouth again.

"Sir? The...meeting the other night. What...what was the result of it? What is he planning?" Harry shuddered. "And what was all that with that Lestrage woman about?"

"Harry! What are you doing?" Ron hissed and Harry whipped around, annoyance on his face.

"Ron! He is not our enemy! He rescued me; he spies for the Order," he hissed back and Ron flinched backwards, startled at the vehement expression on Harry's face. Harry turned back to the Potions Master and waited.

Snape raised an eyebrow. He had been unable to hear what the two boys had said, though Mr Weasley's comment was easy to guess. The expression on the red-haired boy's face after Harry's reply was far more interesting and Snape was unsure what had prompted it. He turned his gaze back to Potter and saw that the boy's expression was serious. Snape turned to the Headmaster.

"It is up to you, Severus," Dumbledore said in answer to Snape's unspoken question.

Snape's lips thinned and a muscle twitched in his cheek. "Very well, Potter, if you insist on knowing I will tell you but not here. Come to my office after dinner, if you wish." Snape then decided to indulge his curiosity. "What precisely did you mean by that comment about Bellatrix Lestranger?"

Harry shuddered and a slightly nauseous expression crossed his face. "Oh yeah, you'd left by then. Well, after you left...Bellatrix got up and started to drape herself over Vol...the Dark Lord. She sort purred a question at him and he hit her and told her to never touch him without permission, cast the Cruciatus curse on her and told her to get out. It was..." He shivered and couldn't continue.

There were horrified and sickened looks from the teenagers and disturbed looks from all of the adults. A contemptuous and disgusted expression settled onto Snape's face.

"So she is the first," he said, almost to himself. "I didn't really pay much attention to who was sitting there; my concentration necessarily was elsewhere." He sneered. "She is merely the first of the women of the Death Eaters who wishes to become the Dark Lord's Lady this time around." The tone of his voice was exceedingly acidic.

The teenagers stared at their Potions Master in disbelief and the three girls then shut their eyes and shuddered.

"Why would any woman..." Ginny said in a shocked voice. "Urgh, I don't really want to finish that sentence."

Molly Weasley scowled at Snape. "Severus! Really! Was it necessary to tell them that?"

Snape smirked. "I do believe that Potter asked," he replied.

"Urgh, yeah, I did," Harry said with a grimace, "and now I'm sorry about that."

Ron shook his head as though to clear it "Man, I do not want to think about that," he muttered and then decided to change the subject.

"Let's get away from that!" he said with decisiveness. "So what did you do today that made you so tired or was it really just staying up late talking last night?"

There was a collective sigh at the change of subject and Harry's face lit up. "Master Nhean showed me how to see!" he said with delight.

There were startled exclamations from both ends of the table and Harry laughed. "No, not seeing as normal but the kind of sight that Night Warriors have." He paused. "Master Nhean? How much can I tell them?"

"You may tell them what you like about what you actually see," he said amiably, "but you may not tell them the incantation. That is reserved for Guild members only."

"Okay," Harry said and proceeded to explain what he could about Oversight and what he saw that afternoon. He thought for a moment at the end of his explanation and then turned towards his teacher.

"Master? Did the colours I saw have any significance?"

"Very good, Harry," Nhean complimented him. "Yes, they did. I presume you were talking about the colours of the energies that made up my shape?" Harry nodded and Nhean continued. "The energy colours you will see for various people give an indication of their essence, of what makes them unique. The colours have multiple meanings however and what you see may only be indicative of one or

two of those meanings. As you get more experienced you will be able to determine the specifics of what you see. They also have different meanings depending on whether the colours are solid or are flecks of colour. For example, what did you see when you looked at me?"

Harry thought back to earlier in the day. "Erm, your energies were a flowing mix of brown and a kind of golden-yellow and there was a purple outline surrounding you. And there was a really soothing hum associated with you as well."

Master Nhean nodded. "Now, brown indicates the attributes of practicality, dependability, earthiness, being natural, physical and reliable. I have been told many times that practical, dependable, earthy and reliable are the attributes that are mine from that list. The golden-yellow colour is a combination of two closely related colours. A golden colour indicates wisdom and yellow indicates intelligence, wit, prowess and happiness. All of those attributes are mine. The purple aura you saw is a common one to all witches and wizards; it indicates magical talent."

Harry nodded in understanding and the other listened in fascination.

"Now to consider your energies as another example," Nhean continued with an intent look at Harry. "Yours are rather unique which I feel has something to do with your past and your future. Your energies are scarlet and silver, flecked with black. Along with, of course, the purple aura. Scarlet indicates courage, loyalty, energy and beauty. Your attributes are courage and loyalty. The silver is the curious part. It is generally more of a feminine colour and indicates light, justice, purity, the moon, protection and reflection. I believe this colour comes from mother's sacrifice as your attributes are light, justice and protection." He paused and took a drink. "When you see

colour flecked through the main colours that is an indication that these are minor attributes. Black indicates darkness, the unknown or esoteric, death, mourning, secrecy, hatred, blindness, evil, fear and uncertainty. In your case, your only attribute from the black is, not surprisingly, blindness. Remember though, the blindness attribute in black can stand for physical blindness like yours or metaphorical blindness."

Harry looked a little stunned. He quickly recovered and Master Nhean asked, "Would you like to try a couple more examples?"

"Yes, definitely," Harry said eagerly.

"Alright," Nhean said calmly. "I hadn't intended to teach you this for another day or so but we might as well try it now since you're eager. We'll do two more people. Who do you want?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Well, with their permission, Remus and erm, Professor Snape."

Remus agreed immediately though Snape stared at Harry with a measuring glance for long moment before finally agreeing with a slow nod.

"Alright Harry, now you do not actually need to speak the words of the incantation to allow Oversight aloud," Nhean said. "You will have to concentrate very hard on them at your current level of training and I suggest you do that while concentrating on your subject. It will make

it easier. Then tell me the energy colours you see. I will know if you are correct or not."

Harry nodded and cleared his mind. He concentrated on Remus and then began to also concentrate on the incantation he had learned earlier. Just when he thought he was getting nowhere, the energy colours within Remus burst into his sight. He gasped and stared with rapt attention.

"Um," he said finally with a small frown, "Remus is dark red, scarlet and light brown and the colours are flecked with light green. Oh, and the purple aura."

"Well done," Nhean said proudly. "Now let go of the incantation. As you might expect I have examined the energies of everyone here and I am capable of determining the attributes so I shall explain what you saw. It is most common for people to exhibit two main colours though as you have seen some can have more. A few will have less. Now, the dark red you saw is a variation of red. Red indicates passion; in particular, lust, love, raw energy, force, anger, aggression, hate, overwhelming and extreme emotion. The dark red indicates these are tempered with wisdom and restraint. Remus' attributes from the dark red are raw energy, anger and aggression tempered with the wisdom and restraint I mentioned."

Remus' face became shadowed and Nhean held his gaze while he continued speaking to Harry. "We have spoken about the scarlet before and like you, Remus' attributes are courage and loyalty. The light brown is one of the few colours that has a single and rather odd meaning. It indicates that the person has high aspirations that have been tainted by realistic doubt. Finally, the light green flecks indicate

new growth, youth, potential, vitality and health. Remus' attributes are vitality and health."

Harry looked a little confused at the last; knowing that Remus had a tendency to appear tired and worn-out but Master Nhean did not let him or the other dwell on that.

"Now, try again but this time concentrate the spell on Professor Snape," he instructed.

Harry nodded and repeated his efforts. It came a little easier this time and he examined the energies of the Potions Master.

"Professor Snape is golden-yellow and scarlet with flecks of a kind of dried blood colour," Harry said and ended the spell.

Nhean nodded again. "Well done for a second time, Harry. I think you will master this part of Oversight very quickly." Harry grinned with delight and Nhean continued. "Now to explain; Professor Snape shares the golden-yellow colour with me. His attributes are wisdom, intelligence, wit and prowess. His scarlet attributes are courage and loyalty. That dried blood colour is officially termed blood red-brown which sounds much nicer." Nhean chuckled. "It indicates greed, avarice, hypocrisy, treason, betrayal and greed. Professor Snape's attributes are treason and betrayal. Attributes which are not uncommon among spies such as the Professor."

Nhean eyed the slightly suspicious faces that had appeared on some of those sitting around the table. "If his loyalty were to the Dark Lord," he said dryly, "then there would have been black in there as well and the blood red-brown would also probably have indicated more than betrayal and treason."

This changed the suspicious looks to startled ones and Snape smirked sourly. Harry considered him for a long moment, making Snape twitch a little. Harry's blind regard was a touch disconcerting at times and he had yet to break the habit of looking at who he was talking to.

Dumbledore clapped his hands, gaining everyone's immediate attention. "Well, that was interesting, wasn't it?" he said with a benign smile. "Shall we leave it there for the night?" He raised an eyebrow and the adults began nodding.

"Come on, kids," Remus said as he rose. "I believe I offered to let you lot pester Harry and I tonight."

The teenagers rose from the table after a moment of hesitation and left, laughing and chattering loudly about what had just occurred and teasing Remus. The adults followed them out considerably more quietly, leaving Severus Snape sitting at the table, cradling his goblet from dinner and musing over what had just been revealed.

Chapter 10

A couple of hours later, Harry was making his way down to the dungeons. The time he had just spent with his friends had been great. They had apparently finally come to terms with his blindness and conversations no longer centred on it. Instead they asked about his training and when they were going to get their chance. Fred and George had piped up saying they wouldn't mind a bit of training which had of course led into discussions of the Order. The twins told them they had joined, much to their mother's horror, and were working on a variety of booby traps and assorted other devices under the supervision of Mad-Eye Moody. They described him as a hard taskmaster but very creative. He'd had suggestions that even the twins hadn't thought about and had even floated the idea of the twins doing some research work for the Aurors as a sideline after all of this was over. That had led the discussion to Voldemort and what he was doing and Harry's current destination. He wanted to know what had happened in the meeting. Though he had witnessed it all, there were a lot of undercurrents running through even such a short meeting that Harry hadn't really understood. He also wanted to know why Snape had told Voldemort about what had happened to him and why it was so exaggerated.

He stood in front of the door to the Potions classroom for a moment before finally knocking. He was therefore startled to hear Snape's voice come from further down the corridor.

"I might have known you would insist upon knowing things which you should not," Snape said with a sneer.

"Er, Professor, I think I ought to know," Harry said in a tone that was both defiant and hesitant. "What happened in that meeting was about

me and, under the circumstances, I need all the information I can get if he is going to make an attempt at me."

Snape considered the boy standing in front of the door to his classroom. There was a certain amount of truth in what the boy had said. He scowled down at the glass in his hand and swirled the deep red wine around for moment while he considered his answer.

"Perhaps," he said sourly. "Well, if you insist on knowing about this then I insist on being comfortable for it. Come in."

Harry stared blindly in the direction of the Potions Master for a moment and then cautiously made his way down to the corridor to the door to Snape's private quarters.

Snape smirked at the expression on the boy's face and when Harry got to the door, he took the boy's arm and led him across the room to a chair in front of the fire. Harry ran a hand over the arm of the chair as he sat down. The fabric was soft and well worn and the chair was large and the cushions soft. Obviously the Potions Master liked his comforts. If he had been able to see he would have noticed that comfort was a theme in the room. The two chairs by the fire were large and comfortable, upholstered in faded and worn green velvet. The walls were covered in bookshelves which were in turn crammed full of books. Most were, of course, devoted to potion-making but there were many books on Defence, as well as Transfiguration and Charms. One bookshelf was entirely devoted to fiction, mostly muggle and mostly mysteries and, oddly enough, detective novels. A desk against one wall was covered in papers, books, quills and ink. There were three doors that had been left slightly ajar. One led to a bathroom. The second opened onto an equally comfortable bedroom

and the third led to a large workroom, where potions bubbled in large cauldrons. The colour that abounded in all four rooms was a dark emerald green.

Harry felt oddly comfortable in these rooms; they felt warm and, strangely enough, cosy; not exactly words he would have associated with Snape. But then, he considered, he didn't really know the Potions Master that well. He heard the sound of someone sitting down opposite him.

"Well, Potter?" Snape said sourly.

"Er, well," Harry stammered and Snape sighed in exasperation.

"If you must disturb my evening, Mr Potter," he said acidly, "the least you could do is stop stammering and get to the point."

Harry blushed. "Sorry, sir. Erm, why did you exaggerate what had happened to me so much?"

"Because that is what the Headmaster and I decided on," Snape replied. "We felt that if the Dark Lord thought you were seriously injured he would take his time on his planning, giving us time to counter those plans."

Harry thought about this for a moment and nodded. "Okay, that makes a lot of it make sense. Has Vol...er, He asked you to do anything yet? And what was your reward?" Harry paused and shuddered. "Or do I not want know that?"

Snape smirked and then shifted in his seat. He took a long swallow of the wine in his glass. He eyed the boy sitting across from him for a long moment and was suddenly startled at how adult the boy looked. Though his eyes were staring sightless in his direction, there was a seriousness and weariness in them that was unusual in a boy of fifteen. Snape frowned as he realised that the boy's sixteenth birthday was tomorrow. He then scowled as he realised just how much the boy looked like James now and he flinched. He had found that could not, in all truth, treat the boy like he was his father anymore. He had had a very sharp lesson in how the boy had been treated by his relatives and had struggled since then to acknowledge to himself that, with such an upbringing, he could never be like his father.

He looked across at the man-child sitting opposite him and scrubbed his face with one hand. The affairs in the Department of Mysteries and the loss of both his idiot godfather and his sight had stripped a lot of the innocence from the boy. And he had to admit, the boy had been polite to him during his Occlumency lessons, in spite of his deliberate sniping. Snape came to a decision.

"I do not know what the Dark Lord has planned, though he has contacted me through Wormtail. He has asked me to make a number of potions. What he intends to do with them, I can only guess," Snape replied quietly but seriously. "He has asked for Veritaserum as well as a number of potions of my own devising. Potions that induce pain, one that is highly addictive and a few others you do not need to know about."

Harry was startled at this honest and completely acid-free answer and nodded in acknowledgment.

"I believe my 'reward' will be access to the Dark Lord's inner sanctum," Snape said musingly. "Little though I wish it. Irrespective of that, it will allow me to discover many of his plans."

"That's a reward," Harry said incredulously. "I think I'd refuse it."

To Harry's utter surprise, Snape chuckled sourly. "Would that I could. He rewards rather infrequently however and no one refuses."

Harry was struggling with his surprise and shock and finally could hold them in no longer. "Sir? Why are you treating me like this?" he blurted out and then blushed, wishing he could take that back. He hunched and waited for the scathing answer.

Snape scowled at the hunched figure in front of him. "You are wondering why I am treating you like an adult?" he asked sarcastically. "Well, perhaps that is because for the first time in your life you are acting like one. Believe me; should you decide to start acting like a child again, I shall immediately resume treating you like one."

Harry straightened up with a startled look but quickly became a little shame-faced. He looked down and swallowed, hoping that Ron and Hermione would forgive him for what he was about to say.

"Well, if you're going to treat me like an adult, I guess I had better act like one and confess a few things," he said and swallowed nervously again. "I didn't steal the Boomslang skin from your private stores, that was Hermione." He gave a small grin. "She thought Ron and I had gotten into enough trouble as it was."

Snape, whose eyebrow had risen in interest at the beginning of Harry's little speech, scowled.

"And why, may I ask, was Miss Granger stealing such an ingredient," he asked menacingly.

Harry gulped. "We needed it to make the Polyjuice potion," he blurted and Snape stared at him in surprise.

"You or rather Miss Granger I assume, brewed the Polyjuice Potion...in second year? Why?" Snape asked almost incredulously.

"Erm, well, it was during the whole thing with the Chamber of Secrets. You know how everyone seemed to think I was the Heir of Slytherin because I could speak Parseltongue?" Harry said with an irritated roll of his eyes. "Well, we wanted to find out who it actually was and, well, our best candidate was Draco Malfoy. After his comment about Mudblood's being next, we figured either he was the one or would know who it was."

Snape eyed him with interest; that was a rather well reasoned piece of thinking. He decided to ignore the slur on his House for the moment. "And was it?"

"Erm no, actually," Harry said with small shrug. "Ron and I used the potion to disguise ourselves as Crabbe and Goyle and Hermione was going to disguise herself as Millicent Bulstrode." Harry broke out into a grin. "She made a mistake though. She had what she thought was a hair from Millicent's head but it was actually from her cat." Harry laughed. "Hermione looked...well, a little strange and she spent some time in the hospital wing for that one. Anyway, the Heir wasn't Malfoy and he didn't know who it was, but he did make it pretty clear that his father knew who it was." Harry paused. "You're not going to give Hermione detention or anything, are you?" he asked nervously.

Snape stayed silent for a moment, causing Harry's nervousness to increase tenfold. He finally relented with an amused smirk. "No, it hardly seems worth it now," he said with a snort. "Though you may inform Miss Granger that if she wishes to undertake an Extended Study Project in potions, I would be willing to supervise her work."

Harry smiled in delight for his friend. "Really? I'm sure she'd be interested."

Snape snorted again. "No doubt she would," he said snidely. "Since you are confessing, Mr Potter, what about the Gillyweed?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "That wasn't me either. That was Dobby. The fake Moody knew that I wasn't even close to figuring out how to solve

the second task and staged a conversation about Gillyweed with Professor Sprout when Dobby was in the room and asked whether I would think to use it. He knew that Dobby would do anything to help me and when I ran out of time, Dobby stole it and gave it to me. You can't punish him for that!"

Snape muttered something to himself and Harry snorted with laughter, his now sensitive hearing picking up Snape's comment about being denied the golden opportunity to take points from Gryffindor. Snape glared at Harry and gave a soundless snarl of irritation at the sheer ineffectiveness of that tactic. He had forgotten about Harry's improved senses.

Harry swallowed his laughter. "I'm sorry, sir, I know I wasn't meant to hear that," he apologised.

Snape sighed. "No apology needed, Mr Potter. The comment was, I suppose, unworthy. I trust that in future if you or your little cronies feel the need for unusual potion ingredients you will refrain from raiding my supplies. I believe there is a perfectly good shop in Hogsmeade for those purposes."

Harry swallowed another grin and nodded. He got up from the chair. "I'd...better go, sir. I think I've disturbed you enough for one night." He paused. "Sir? Will you or Professor Dumbledore tell me when Vol...er, the Dark Lord makes up his mind on what he is going to do?"

"I believe that the Headmaster intends to keep both you and Lupin informed," Snape replied, then looked at Harry curiously. "May I ask

why you insist upon calling the Dark Lord by his name when so many others fail to do so?"

Harry stared blindly at Snape, his face full of confusion. "I...well, I suppose at first it was because I didn't know that people didn't say it and then it was just because it seemed a bit ridiculous to keep saying You-Know-Who or He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named." He paused. "Professor Dumbledore once said that fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself...or something along those lines and he's right. His name is Voldemort, or well, I suppose its Tom Riddle actually, I think we should call him that and not let his name make us afraid. That's what he wants after all."

Snape was surprised; that was a very astute answer. "You and the Headmaster are correct." He stopped and considered the young man standing in front of him. "But do you understand why I do not call him that nor think or speak of him in any way other than the Dark Lord?"

Harry nodded; that answer had occurred to him late one night during his first week back at Hogwarts when the ache in his face had kept him awake and he'd tried to bore himself to sleep by thinking of the Potions Master and his behaviour.

"You have to maintain the correct mindset. You have to call him that. If you referred to him in any other way it would be suspicious and could get you into trouble or even killed. That's why you'll continue to treat me like...well, like something you've scraped off the bottom of your shoe whenever you meet me in a public place when school restarts." Snape smirked at Harry's description; it was rather accurate. Harry continued. "There are too many children here whose parents are Death Eaters for you to ever treat me the way you have tonight in public. If you did, you would be signing your own death warrant."

Snape relaxed; the boy...no, young man did understand. He was surprised to find that he could tolerate Potter when he was acting like an adult, though he was sure that inevitably the young man's Gryffindor stupidity would shine through. He stood and ushered the young man out of his quarters. He was just closing the door when Potter turned and graced him with an impish grin.

"You might be interested to know, sir, that the Sorting Hat did consider putting me in Slytherin," he paused and continued airily, "but I talked it out of doing that." He turned and tapped his way back up the corridor as quickly as he could, leaving a very startled Potions Master behind him.

Snape stared at Potter's receding back. Potter in Slytherin; he closed his eyes and shuddered then stared back down the corridor in surprise. The Hat wanted to put him in Slytherin and he talked it out of that. That shouldn't be possible!

Harry made his way back to the suite he was sharing with Remus, laughing quietly to himself. The stunned silence he had left behind him was truly priceless and had allowed him to regain a little of his stability after that most unusual conversation. He had been surprised when Snape had invited him into his private quarters; as far as he was aware no student, not even a Slytherin, had ever been in there. But the Potions Master's attitude had stunned him. He had never been treated so well by the man. Oh, certainly there were plenty of snide comments and sarcastic remarks but there was none of the

truly nasty stuff that he was used to from Snape. He laughed, he could put up with the snide, sarcastic and surly comments. He wouldn't know how to react to a Snape who wasn't those things but he certainly appreciated the lack of truly spiteful and hurtful comments. Maybe he wasn't the only one who was acting more like an adult these days.

He muttered the password that opened the portrait and wandered through the main room into his bedroom. He walked over to his bed and was just about to rest his cane against the bedside table when he froze. There was something or someone in the room.

He gripped his cane a little tighter and gave a tiny little twist to disengage the locking spell on the sword. He slowly turned around, listening carefully and taking deep breaths to scent the air.

There was definitely something in the room; something alive. He carefully pulled the sword out, trying to be as silent as possible. With a shake of his head he remembered the Oversight spell and muttered the words to activate it. As the room came alive with colour and light, he heard something shuffle in one corner. He whipped around and saw something...odd.

The walls in his room glowed with flowing white, silver and gold energy but on one wall there was a large rectangle of mottled black and red energies. Harry held his sword in front of him and began to back slowly towards the door. As he did the rectangle moved with him, also towards the door. He stopped and so did whatever it was on the wall. He thought furiously and started backing away from the creature. It didn't move and he drew in a deep breath and started yelling.

"REMUS! HELP! REMUS, WAKE UP! I NEED YOUR HELP!"

He was forced to stop when the creature leapt towards him. He swiped at it with his sword and was rewarded with a hiss and the creature flew off to another wall. He backed away from it again.

"REMUS!" he yelled again, hoping fervently that his guardian wasn't a sound sleeper.

The creature crawled up the wall and onto the ceiling and Harry swore. He backed up to the wall and began to edge his way around towards the door again. Before he could get too far, the creature scuttled towards him and dropped on top of him. It wrapped itself around him and he felt teeth bury themselves into his shoulder. He gave a pained yelp and dropped his sword. He struggled in the folds of the creature and finally realised what it was.

A Lethifold, he thought with something close to panic. I read something about these. Weapons can't really hurt them and neither can most spells.

He desperately wracked his brain, trying to remember what it was that could help. The Lethifold clamped down on his shoulder with its teeth and began to wrap itself more firmly around him. He gasped with pain and struggled to get his brain working. It finally came to him; the Patronus spell would work. He wiggled his hand around behind him and pulled his wand out of his back pocket. Even though he couldn't really use it well at the moment, he hadn't wanted to walk around without it. He tried to conjure up a happy memory and finally

managed ignore his situation long enough to drag up the memory of winning the House Cup.

"Expecto patronum," he gasped weakly and a transparent silver stag leapt out of the end of his wand. The Lethifold let go of him with a high-pitched scream. At the same time the door to his room burst open and he saw the dark red/scarlet/light brown of Remus standing in the doorway.

"Lethifold," he gasped and pointed to the corner near the window.

Remus swore under his breath and pointed his wand in the direction Harry indicated. "Expecto patronum!" he said forcefully. A large silver wolf burst out from his wand and Harry saw the mottled black and red of the Lethifold disappear out of his partially open window.

Harry slumped down against the wall and ended the Oversight spell. His shoulder hurt and he could feel the blood running from the bites. Remus quickly ran over to the window and slammed it shut, muttering a locking spell. He turned towards Harry and swore again when he saw the blood. He helped Harry to his feet and half-carried him down to the hospital wing.

As they stumbled through the door, Remus started yelling for the school's mediwitch. She came flying out of her quarters and turned on the lights in the ward. She gasped when she saw the wound on Harry's shoulder and immediately bustled over and gently guided him onto a bed.

"What caused this?" she asked them both sternly.

Harry was content to remain slumped while Remus answered. "Harry said it was a Lethifold, Poppy."

Poppy stared at Remus for a bare second and then started prodding Harry's shoulder with her wand.

"Remus, go and wake up the Headmaster," she ordered. "He'll want to know about this immediately."

Remus nodded and ran out of the hospital wing while Poppy continued poking the hideous bite marks with her wand, carefully healing them. When she was done she helped Harry into the bed and bustled off to her office to get him a Dreamless Sleep potion. As she was coming back out of her office, Dumbledore and Remus came rushing into the hospital wing.

"Poppy!" Remus gasped. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, "everything's fine. The wounds were nasty but fairly clean. No scars but the boy needs some sleep so keep your questions to a minimum." She turned to Harry. "Now I want you to drink all of this when the Headmaster is done."

Remus assured her that he would see that the potion was taken and she eyed the two men severely before returning to her office. Remus sat on the edge of the bed and placed a hand over one of Harry's.

"Alright there, Harry?" he asked and Harry nodded with a tired smile.

Dumbledore came up to the end of the bed. "Now, Harry," he said kindly. "I know you probably wish to do nothing more than rest but I wish to hear the story of what happened from you."

Harry nodded again. "Well, I had just come back from speaking to Professor Snape and when I walked into my room, I...just...well, kind of knew that there was something in the room."

"How?" Remus asked with interest.

"Don't know really," Harry replied with a frown. "I...well, I could just sense it I suppose. Maybe its got something to do with my improving senses, I don't know. Anyway, I used Oversight to try and find it. It was on the wall, kind of a large rectangular shape and a mottled red and black. I, well, you did know that my cane has a sword in it?" Harry looked a bit apprehensive.

Remus looked surprised and Dumbledore patted his feet. "Yes, dear boy. And I know that Nhean will be teaching you how to use it."

Harry looked relieved and continued with his tale. "Well, I drew my sword and started backing towards the door but it moved towards the door with me and I saw that I wasn't going to beat it. I started backing away and it stayed still and I started yelling for Remus. That's when it attacked me. It sort of leapt towards me and I slashed at it with my sword and it backed off to the wall again. It crawled up onto the ceiling and I realised I wouldn't be able to get around it. I tried backing up to the wall and edging around to the door but it dropped down onto to me. That's when I realised what it was. I read about Lethifolds last year when I was preparing for the DA lessons on the Patronus spell but I wasn't expecting it to bite me. I didn't know they had teeth." He shuddered and grimaced. "I dropped my sword when it bit me which was pretty stupid. Anyway it started wrapping itself around me and I knew that spells wouldn't hurt it but it took me a bit to remember how to get rid of it. I didn't manage much of a Patronus but it was enough that it backed off. That's when Remus came in and got rid of it."

"So they have teeth," Remus mused with academic interest. "That's interesting. Nobody knows much about Lethifolds and the one eyewitness account we have doesn't mention any teeth. I wonder if that's because they don't normally need to use them. Their victims are usually asleep." He frowned. "But that doesn't explain why it attacked someone who was awake. I didn't think they did that."

"Neither did I," the Headmaster said with concern. "But I'm more interested in how it managed to get through the wards and into the room."

Remus grimaced. "It got into the room because the window was open. I've closed it and added a locking spell."

Dumbledore nodded in acknowledgment. "Hmm, but that does not explain how it crossed the wards. Remus, I would like you to stay here with Harry for the rest of the night. I shall examine the wards and see if they will need strengthening." The Headmaster patted Harry's feet again and swiftly left the room.

Remus started to get off the bed but stopped when Harry grabbed his arm.

"Remus, I know Professor Dumbledore asked you to stay but...could you just go back and get my cane for me?" he asked a little plaintively and Remus grinned.

"Of course, I won't be more than a few minutes. And I'd like to get a look at this sword."

Harry laughed and Remus loped out of the room. He was back shortly and handed the cane over to Harry.

"It's a little loose in the scabbard there," he observed and Harry grinned. He gave the tiny little twist that engaged the locking spell and then had to show Remus exactly how it worked. After a couple of minutes of this, Remus shook his head.

"What am I doing?" he muttered to himself and picked up the potion from the bedside table. He took the cane out of Harry's hands and gave him the potion. "Come on, Harry, drink this and get some rest."

Harry grinned and swallowed the potion. He shuffled down in the bed until he was comfortable and quickly nodded off. Remus watched for a moment then conjured himself a comfortable chair and settled in for the night.

Remus was woken from his light doze the next morning by Severus Snape entering the hospital wing, potion flasks in hand. He quickly stood, spun around and levelled his wand at the Potions Master before becoming fully awake and putting his wand away with an apology.

Snape eyed the two inhabitants of the hospital wing with sarcasm. "Dare I ask how Potter managed to end up in here again?"

"Wasn't my fault this time, Professor," came the amused response from Harry. Remus turned to grin at him and Harry levered himself into a sitting position. "I got attacked in my own room. Definitely wasn't my fault."

Snape sobered. "Attacked? By what?"

"A Lethifold. And a rather nasty one. It bit me." Harry said with a frown. "I still can't believe it did that. I thought they just smothered people to death."

"How did it get past the wards?" Snape asked with suspicion. "A Lethifold should have been stopped well before it reached the castle."

"That's what was worrying Albus last night," said Remus with a sigh. "He's checking the wards; has been all night. It shouldn't have been able to get through and its behaviour was unusual."

Snape frowned. "Are you sure it was a Lethifold then?"

"Harry is," Remus replied. "I didn't see it myself; it was too dark in the room. I could see Harry in the light coming in from the door but I couldn't see the Lethifold. I just cast the Patronus spell in the direction Harry indicated."

"Well, Mr Potter?" Snape asked impatiently.

Harry frowned, trying to remember all the details from the night before. "Well, the shape was right and the way it wrapped itself around me was right from the descriptions I read. It definitely reacted to the Patronus spells that both Remus and I cast. I don't see how it could be anything else. Admittedly there was nothing in the books about teeth but then the books also admitted not much was known about Lethifolds." He shrugged. "As for its behaviour, I don't know. It was waiting for me but whether that was deliberate or not, well, I can't say. Would Vol...er, the Dark Lord send something like that after me?"

Remus looked back and forth between the two of them while Snape considered the question. This was the first time he had seen them have a civil conversation that didn't descend into insults and he was rather pleased with the change. Having to separate them wasn't something he enjoyed. Obviously the conversation Harry mentioned had allowed them to bury a few hatchets...and not in each other for once.

"I suppose it is possible," Snape mused, "but it would be unusual. He wants to triumph over you, Mr Potter, not just kill you. He wants to stand over you and tell you how much better he is just before he kills you." Snape said this last with a sneer.

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, tell me about it," he said with exasperation.

A corner of Snape's mouth twitched upwards for a moment and Remus grinned.

"Under the circumstances, I will excuse you from today's lesson," Snape said. "You would be unable to concentrate and I wish to offer my services to the Headmaster." He nodded briefly to Remus and strode quickly into Pomfrey's office to offload the potions he had brought. He then made his rapid way out of the hospital wing.

Remus watched him go and turned back to Harry. "Well, I think you should get up. Severus may have excused you but somehow I don't think Master Nhean will."

Harry grimaced and groped along the bedside table for his cane. "I know, though I don't really want him to. I felt pretty useless standing there last night. I think I need to start learning how to defend myself as soon as possible."

Remus laughed and agreed with him and went to get Madam Pomfrey. The school's mediwitch gave him a quick check and reluctantly released him with the stern injunction that if he started feeling at all strange or in pain he was to return immediately. Remus offered his arm to Harry and the two of them returned to their suite.

Chapter 11

Any thoughts of training, as well as breakfast, were thrown out of Harry's mind when he and Remus got back to the suite. They walked in to find the room crowded with people who burst out with 'Happy Birthday, Harry' the moment the door was opened. Remus gave Harry a gentle push into the room and watched with a smile as he was engulfed by his friends.

They pulled him over to the couch, pushed him down onto it and started handing him the presents that had been piled onto the table to unwrap. The Weasleys all insisted that their parent's present be the first unwrapped and handed it to Harry with a great deal of anticipation and a lot of grinning.

Harry accepted it and fumbled the wrapping open. Inside was a small wooden box and when he opened it, a clock hand was revealed that had Harry's picture on it. Harry ran his hand over it gently to try and identify what it was and looked up with a question on his face. Mrs Weasley sat down next to him and gave him a quick hug.

"It's your clock hand, dear," she said with affection, "for home."

Harry looked down and ran his fingers over the clock hand again. He looked up with a huge smile on his face and tears in his eyes. "Thanks, Mrs Weasley," he said in a choked voice and she drew him into another hug. She gave him a quick kiss on his cheek and took the box from him.

"Just give me that now, dear, and I'll see that it's put on the clock as soon as possible," she said with a smile and got up to allow him to move on to the rest of his presents. Harry blinked back the tears and accepted his next gift.

There was much laughter over the next half-hour as Harry unwrapped his presents.

Hermione's was probably the most useful. She had found a magical device that could be used on books. Once it was attached to the book, it acted as a kind of wizarding audio book. It could read the entire book or it also had an index facility that allowed you to go straight to the section you wished. It could also be magically adjusted to the individual user so that the sound could only be heard by the user. Harry had been extremely impressed with this; he had been wondering how he was going to manage any kind of independent study.

Fred and George's present was the most fun, of course; though it was quickly hidden from the teachers in the room, much to their amusement. It contained a wide selection of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and came with a whispered suggestion that perhaps Ron and Ginny would be willing be his personal aides in their use. Harry laughed as Ron and Ginny agreed almost immediately.

Finally he was down to his last two presents. Hermione handed him the largish one that was wrapped in plain green wrapping. She looked at the small card attached to it and her mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Er, Harry, this one's from Professor Snape," she said slowly.

Everyone but Harry turned to the Potions Master in surprise. He had been standing in the corner of the lounge room watching the proceedings with a disgruntled expression on his face. This turned into a fully-fledged glare and snarl when everyone turned to him. Harry ignored this and slowly opened the present. It was a book and Hermione gasped in delight when she saw it.

"Oh, Harry!" she said. "It's The Complete Potions Compendium! Its one of the best reference books for potion-making that there is. It's almost impossible to get the ones in the library; someone's always got them. I hope you'll let me borrow it!"

Surprise crossed Harry's face and he looked up towards where he had heard the Potions Master's snarl come from. "Thank you, sir!" he said.

A discomforted look crossed Snape's face. "Your Master tells me you are to study Potions, Potter. If you wish to do better than you did in my class perhaps you should study that book," he said sharply.

Harry grinned; only Professor Snape could turn a 'You're Welcome' into a lecture and an insult. The other teenagers had started grumbling at Snape's response but were startled into silence by Harry's grin. He mouthed a 'Later' at them and Hermione put the book on the table and handed him his last present.

"This one is from Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said and the giver in question stepped forward.

"Harry, before you open your present I wish to say a few things," the Headmaster said with a twinkle in his eye. "After the events in my office at the end of the last school year, I took the liberty of assuming that you wish to join the Order of the Phoenix. While you are not yet considered of age in the wizarding community, I have spoken to Remus, Arthur and Molly and they, as your guardians, have agreed to this. I trust I can rely on your discretion when it comes to discussing Order matters with your friends. I also hope that I can rely on you to come to either myself or one of the other Order members here at Hogwarts at any time if you should need our help or advice." The words 'unlike last year' went unspoken but clearly heard. "Inside your present you will find the amulet that identifies you as a member of the Order. It provides you with a means of contacting fellow Order members if needed; merely hold it in your hand, speak the word 'Affor' followed by the name of whomever you wish to speak to. It will also act as a Portkey and will always bring you to my office here at Hogwarts if you hold it in your hand and activate it with the word 'Violet Crumble'."

Harry nodded and opened the present. He placed the chain around his neck and tucked the amulet under his shirt along with his Guild charm.

"Excellent!" said Dumbledore with pleasure. "Now I believe there is a rather nice cake down in the Great Hall for you, Harry, which I am most anxious to taste. Shall we go and find out just how good it is?"

Harry laughed and nodded and the entire group trooped down to the Great Hall. The one exception was Professor Snape who used the movement to slip away. Harry didn't notice however and his impromptu party continued through the morning and into lunch. After lunch, he was approached by Remus who said he needed to speak to him after dinner. He was then led away by Master Nhean.

When they got to the classroom, Nhean sat him down and asked for a detailed explanation of the attack by the Lethifold. Harry told him about all that had happened from the moment he had stepped into his bedroom, including his use of Oversight and his use and the subsequent dropping of his sword. Nhean listened to the entire tale in silence and then considered the events.

"Well, Harry, considering your current level of expertise, I think you did well," Nhean said finally, to Harry's surprised pleasure. "You were very quick to realise that there was something in the room with you. You remembered very quickly for someone at your stage of training to instigate your Oversight. You made some astute tactical moves and you were able to remember how to deal with the creature in spite of your rather acute situation. Your only mistake was to drop your sword but, at your current stage of training, I cannot count that as being a major mistake. You may have done more damage to yourself trying to use it without training." He stopped and smiled at Harry's pleased expression. "However I do believe that whether this was a deliberate attack or not, we must increase the pace of your training."

Harry sighed with relief. "I was going to ask you about doing that. I felt pretty helpless last night."

Deep amusement caused the Night Master's face to crinkle. "You may regret that eagerness shortly but I can understand your feelings

last night. Now, do you feel comfortable moving around in those clothes?"

Harry thought about the clothes that Remus had brought him that morning. He was wearing jeans, t-shirt and sneakers so he nodded.

"Good," said Nhean and he led Harry out of the door.

Late that afternoon Harry limped back into the suite, surprising Remus who had been reading.

"Harry! What happened to you?" Remus said with sympathetic humour.

Harry rolled his eyes and all but fell down onto the couch. "Master Nhean agreed with me about speeding up my training so he had me walking and running all over this whole damn castle this afternoon."

"Why?" Remus asked, stifling his laughter.

Harry groaned. "Because I have to be comfortable moving around before he'll start any kind of training in those martial arts he's going to teach me."

Remus couldn't stop himself grinning. "So are you comfortable?"

Harry scowled. "You're laughing at me, aren't you? You're saying to yourself that I asked for it and I got it," he said grumpily and then laughed. "Yeah, I'm pretty comfortable and I did it all without Oversight. It'll be easier when I start using that more often."

Remus reached over and ruffled Harry's hair, making it stick up even more than normal. Harry batted his hand away and tried to smooth it down again, making Remus laugh.

"Give it up, Harry," he said. "In all the years I was friends with James, I never saw him get that mop of his under control so I don't think you're going to succeed either. And speaking of success, I'm glad you had some today." Harry gave a wry grin and Remus hesitated before he continued. "Harry...I was going to wait until after dinner to tell you this but I might as well get it over and done with now. The Dursleys have been found."

Silence greeted this announcement and Harry's face became expressionless. Remus eyed him with worry.

"How?" Harry asked finally. "Where were they and what's going to happen to them?"

"The muggle authorities found them yesterday," Remus said carefully, "and handed them over to the Ministry of Magic last night. They were in New York and lying pretty low. It was only sheer stupidity on their part that allowed them to be discovered. They insisted on bragging about Dudley at a dinner party they'd been invited to and mentioned he had attended a school called...Smeltings, I think. One of the other guests at the dinner party was a social worker and he remembered the name from the alert that was sent out. He was able to question them and get enough to tentatively identify them. The information was passed onto the wizarding authorities in the US and they moved in and ascertained the truth. A hearing will be held in the Wizengamot in four days."

Harry was silent again for a moment. "Will I have to testify against them?"

"We don't think so," Remus said kindly. "Professor Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Snape and I have all given testimony about what we saw and heard. We're hoping that will be enough. Also Professor Dumbledore has notified them that he would be willing to allow them to see what you told us via his memory in a pensieve. Besides, I think under the circumstance the Wizengamot will authorise the use of Veritaserum. They've been hinting that whenever we have spoken to them."

Harry nodded and Remus scooted closer and put an arm around his shoulders. Harry smiled weakly.

"It's okay, Remus," he said. "It's just...I had kind of managed to not think about them." He paused and thought hard. "I...I want to go to the hearing."

Remus gaped at him. "Are...are you sure, Harry? You don't have to, you know?"

"You're going, aren't you?" Harry asked

"Well, yes, but that's because I have to give my testimony."

"I want to go," Harry said firmly and then sighed. "I...need to go, Remus. I...I need to see this through to the end." He gave a wry smile. "So to speak."

"Alright," Remus said with a resigned sigh.

Harry relaxed. "Thanks."

Remus sighed again and stood. "You'd better go and have a shower, Harry. I'll go and tell the Headmaster that you want to go to the hearing." He stopped and his voice took on an earnest, caring tone. "Are you really sure that you want to go?"

Harry nodded firmly and stood. Remus patted him on the shoulder and left the suite.

Harry showered and changed in to fresh clothes. He left the suite and started to make his way down to the Great Hall but quickly changed his mind. He wasn't really that hungry any more and really wanted to think about things for a while. He turned and made his way up to the Astronomy Tower.

Ginny wandered along the corridor trying to figure out where Harry might be. He hadn't come down to dinner and Mum had been frantic. Remus hadn't been too worried; he seemed to think that they should just leave Harry be for a while but Mum had refused to take that as an answer and Remus had refused to elaborate. Ginny wasn't sure which way to go; there was a part of her that wanted to wait on Harry hand and foot for the rest of her life but another larger part of her reacted in horror and scoffed at that idea and told her that Harry wouldn't appreciate it. She'd spent the better part of the last year being very confused about Harry and she had reacted by trying to be as normal as possible and dating a few boys. It had kind of worked; she had managed to get rid of her little girl crush on him. She snorted and shook her head; that had been embarrassing for all concerned. It was certainly much more fun being around Harry when she wasn't being a complete idiot and he wasn't sitting there dumbfounded and unable to figure out what to do. She'd almost felt as though she was part of the Gryffindor Trio a few times.

Last year had also enabled her to figure what she really felt for Harry and she'd come to the conclusion during the summer that she thought she might be in love with him. She wasn't really sure; she'd

never been in love before. But then the news had come of Harry's blinding and now she didn't know what to do or to say or to feel. It had been really hard coming to Hogwarts and she had nearly burst into tears when they had walked into the Entrance Hall. He had been standing there with Remus and when he heard them all come in he had grinned with such happiness. He didn't smile like that very often and he'd seemed genuinely happy that they were there. But it had been so hard to look at him, so hard to see those green eyes staring blindly like that. She'd been hoping beyond hope that Madam Pomfrey or Professor Dumbledore or anybody really had been able to fix his eyes.

She sighed; she had spoken about this over the course of a few nights with Hermione and Luna. She'd told them how she felt and that she didn't know what to do now. The other two girls hadn't been that surprised and had given her some good advice but it was the times that each of the two girls had pulled her aside privately that had been real eye-openers. Hermione's talk had been hard to take...

Flashback

"Ginny?" Hermione whispered one morning at breakfast. "Can I talk to you? Privately?"

Ginny, her mouth full of eggs, nodded and quickly swallowed. "Sure, when?"

"After breakfast."

Ginny nodded again and the two girls turned back to their breakfasts. After they were finished they excused themselves from the table and wandered up to the empty Transfiguration classroom. Ginny sat on one of the windowsills and Hermione propped herself against Professor McGonagall's desk.

Hermione looked down at her shoes for a moment and then took a deep breath. "Ginny, I...I wanted to talk to you about what you've been telling us about the last couple of nights. You know, you're feelings for Harry. 'Cause something happened last night that...well, I...well, it was really important."

Ginny looked confused and a little apprehensive and Hermione sighed and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Look, Ginny," Hermione said firmly, "I know you're still a little confused about your feelings for Harry and what his blinding means to him, to you and to everyone else but I can tell you this, if it's just a silly little schoolgirl crush than...well, forget it. Don't do anything. Harry...Harry was inducted into the Guild of the Night last night and, well, a few things came out. We didn't get a lot of details but from what we did find out, Harry has to kill Voldemort."

Ginny gasped, a horrified look on her face. She opened her mouth to say something but Hermione beat her to it.

"I don't know why or how, Ginny, but he seems pretty convinced and Remus was there and he didn't contradict Harry so I think it must be true. And I'm sure you've noticed how he's been acting since we got here. He's been acting more like an adult which I suppose isn't that much of a surprise. What happened to him and that fact that nothing can be done about it has matured him. Finally." Hermione rolled her eyes as she considered some of the hair-brained things Harry and Ron had done. "I don't doubt the fact that you may be in love with him, Ginny, but you need to work out what kind of love that is. If it's nothing more than a fleeting thing, then let it go. I don't think Harry needs the distraction right now. But if you really love him, deeply and truly, then think carefully. He has to face Voldemort and you know what he's like about being protective towards his friends. It'll be a lot worse if you're his girlfriend and you have to face the fact that he may die. If you don't think you can handle that then don't get involved with him that way. But if you think you can, remember that you have to be there for him and not back away when it gets hard, when he gets angry and upset, when he feels betrayed or lonely." She gave a wry smile. "It's not always the easiest job being Harry's friend but it's always worth it."

Ginny stared at her, tears in her eyes and Hermione's expression faded into one of kindness.

"Look, Ginny, I know I laid that on pretty hard but it was all true. Really think about this before you do anything"

Hermione walked over and gave Ginny a hug and then left the room. Ginny didn't follow her; she had far too much thinking to do.

End Flashback

As hard as listening to what Hermione had to say had been, she had to admit that the older girl was right. This was not something she could throw herself into willy-nilly, without thinking. Even though it did give her a headache. But even more interesting had been when Luna pulled her aside....

Flashback

"Ginny, might I speak with you?" Luna asked airily.

"Sure, Luna," Ginny replied with a smile. She liked Luna. The Ravenclaw girl could sometimes make you doubt her sanity but Ginny had absolutely no doubts that Luna was one the cleverest people she knew. Hermione was the stand out but Luna ran a close second.

The two girls wandered out of the castle and sat on the grass by the lake.

"I have been considering your situation with Harry," Luna said almost absent-mindedly, "I have some words."

"Of advice?" Ginny asked carefully.

"No, not really," Luna replied serenely. "I don't think you need advice. I think you already know what you want. I think you are just afraid to take it."

"Afraid!" Ginny burst out.

"Yes," Luna said calmly, "it's not surprising really. What you want is difficult and complicated. Things always are when your emotions get mixed up in them and when what you're talking about is someone as intriguing and complicated as Harry."

Luna lay back on the grass and stared at the clouds rolling by overhead with interest. She turned and regarded Ginny with the same look.

"He doesn't let any of you all the way in to see the real Harry, you know," she said matter-of-factly. "He's afraid too. That all of you won't like him if you know what he's really like. Silly really but he is a boy. Oh, you've seen most of who he truly is but you haven't seen all the doubts and fears and all those things that boys are so silly about talking about."

She sat up again very suddenly and pinned Ginny under her wide-eyed gaze. "You could be very good for him, if you have the courage to take what you want." She smiled suddenly, the wide, wafty smile Ginny was so used to, got up and walked back to the castle without another word, leaving Ginny sitting there, slightly stunned.

End Flashback

Ginny turned a corner absently as she considered what the two girls had said. They were both right, of course, she had to absolutely sure of what she wanted and then she had to grab it with both hands.

She came to sudden stop as she realised she was standing in front of the door to the Astronomy Tower. She contemplated it for a moment and finally decided there was no harm in checking. She meandered up the stairs and into the classroom. There was no one there but she did see that the door to the roof was open. She walked up the stairs and there was Harry, sitting on the ground, his back against the battlements. His eyes were closed and his head was tilted backwards a little, he seemed to be thinking awfully hard. She carefully cleared her throat.

Harry jumped and his hands shifted on his cane. He stopped and frowned. "Who is it?"

"It's Ginny."

Harry relaxed and smiled wryly. "Oh, hi Ginny. Are you part of your Mum's search party?"

Ginny laughed and walked up the final steps. She sat down next to Harry. "Yes, Mum's frantic."

Harry grimaced. "I don't know what to do," he said with a helpless shrug. "You know I love your Mum but she's driving me crazy. She keeps treating me like I'm about to break or I'm three and it's getting on my nerves."

Ginny laughed. "She loves you, Harry," she said kindly, "and now she's got official permission to treat you like one of her kids, not that she hasn't always done that. Now you know what we all go through." The two of them had a good laugh at that then Ginny continued. "You've just got to learn to do what the twins do, head her off at the pass. Don't let her get herself worked up about things. Answer matter-of-factly as though there's no other response. She'll get all teary and make really embarrassing remarks about how you're growing up so quickly and then she'll move on to your next piece of trouble."

Harry laughed. "Lessons from the master, I assume." He sobered and turned to face her. "And what about you?"

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, startled.

"How do I get you to stop treating me like I'm something fragile or that this is all some great tragedy?" he asked, waving towards his face with the last part. He really wanted to get Ginny past this. During that interminable week when he was waiting to find out about his sight he had spent a fair amount of time thinking about Ginny. He admitted to himself early on that he liked her, though she confused the hell out of him but he supposed that was normal when it came to girls. After all, Hermione seemed to confuse the hell out of Ron. He was pretty nervous about doing anything about Ginny, after all, it wasn't like he'd had much experience with girls. But he wanted to know if there was anything between them. He hoped so, though he was a bit nervous about how the Weasleys would react.

"I...I..." Ginny stammered and Harry relented and groped gently for one of her hands.

"Ginny, I'm okay, really," he said with a gentle smile. "I mean, of course I don't like being blind and I'd take my sight back in an instant if someone offered but...I'm okay. Master Nhean has shown me that I could be something really great if I work hard enough and..." Harry's voice took on a note of wry amusement. "I've got all these really good friends who won't let me protect them and who insist on helping me and coming with me into insanely dangerous situations. So how can things be bad?"

Ginny bowed her head and stared at their joined hands. She liked the look of them and she made a decision.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to upset you." She lifted her head, a bit of her normal steel coming back into her eyes. "And of course we're going to help you, what are friends for? Besides someone's got to watch your back because you're the one who insists on going into these dangerous situations alone. Bugger that!"

Harry laughed aloud and Ginny joined in a little sheepishly.

"That's more like the Ginny I know," he said with delight.

Ginny bit her lip and decided on the 'its-now-or-never' approach, spurred on by the fact that Harry's thumb was making gentle circles on the back of her hand. She leaned forward and kissed him.

Ginny was in heaven. After Harry got over being startled, the kiss became everything she could have hoped for from her first kiss with Harry. It was sweet, soft, a little awkward but oh so loving. Eventually they pulled back from each other, Ginny with a smile and Harry with an almost pleading look on his face. He was thrilled but at the same time scared. He hadn't realised that she liked him that much and now all he could think was that he didn't want her to get hurt.

"Ginny?" he whispered. "Why?"

"Because I think I'm in love with you," she said and then gasped; she hadn't meant to say that just yet. Harry sat back against the wall, his face becoming expressionless. He did not let go of her hand however

and she took some heart from that. She watched him with growing fear.

"Ginny, I...I really like you," he said finally, "but...I..." He seemed unable to articulate what he wanted to say. Ginny remembered Hermione's little talk and what she said Harry had revealed about the prophecy and realised what he was trying to say.

"I don't care, Harry," she said firmly. "Hermione told me about what you said the prophecy said but I prefer to think that you will win and we will have plenty of time together. That's why I don't want to rush things between us; we've got time." Harry looked doubtful at that but Ginny continued on relentlessly. "We've got plenty of time to talk to each other and find out about each other. Plenty of time!"

A small spark of humour began to kindle in Harry's eyes. "You're pretty determined about this, aren't you?" he said weakly.

"Absolutely!" she said and then put on an airy tone. "Besides it's not Voldemort you have to worry about, Harry. You do remember that I've got six brothers, don't you?"

"They'll...they'll be pleased, won't they?" he said plaintively. "I mean, I'm not Draco Malfoy or anything."

Ginny started laughing and leaned against Harry. Much to her delight, he put his arms around her and drew her close. He hardly dared to believe that she actually liked him. He'd been a bit clueless around

her after all and he was sure that he'd deeply offended her at least once. But if she'd decided that she liked, maybe even loved, him anyway, he was prepared to go with it. He determinedly did not think about Voldemort; the moment was too good to ruin.

"That's right," he grumbled good-naturedly. "Make fun of the blind guy."

Ginny laughed again and kissed him. "They'll be thrilled," she reassured him. "Mum'll start doing cartwheels. Dad'll just want to ask you about living with muggles. Bill, Charlie, Fred and George will all play stuffy older brother and then be thrilled and Ron will threaten to kill you if you ever hurt me. And then he'll be thrilled because you're his best friend."

"What am I letting myself in for? Ow!" He rubbed his chest where Ginny had smacked him. That prompted him to remember why he had come up to the Tower.

Ginny noticed his change of mood. "Harry? What's wrong?"

He hesitated a long moment before answering. "I...came up here...because I wanted to think. They've...found the Dursleys."

"Where?" Ginny asked.

"In America but they've been brought back to England. There's a hearing in four days."

"Do you have to go?"

"Well, no," Harry said slowly, "I don't have to. They don't think they'll need my testimony but I'm going anyway. I have to see this finished, Ginny. I have to know that it's over." His voice became very quiet. "And I have to know why my Uncle did this to me."

"I'm coming with you," Ginny said firmly and put her hand over Harry's mouth before he could open it to argue with her. "I'm coming with you."

Harry pulled her hand away and smiled. "I wasn't going to argue with you. I think I've finally realised the futility of that. I'd actually had the idea of asking Professor Dumbledore whether you, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna could all come. I think I'm going to need the support." His face became somewhat grim.

"I'm sure that they'll all want to come," she said. "I mean, if we could face Voldemort's Death Eaters without blinking then the Dursleys won't be a challenge."

Harry laughed and hugged her then hesitated and leant down and kissed her. This kiss started out like the first one but quickly became a little more heated, spurred on by Harry's gentle touches to her face.

They pulled back from each other, breathing heavily and something occurred to Harry.

"Er, Ginny, what about Dean? Aren't you supposed to be going out with him?" he asked carefully.

"Oh, we broke up," she said matter-of-factly. "It was kind of mutual. I mean, I was really only going out with him because I was annoyed with Ron and that wasn't fair to Dean. And he was only going out with me to try and make Lavender jealous, which he realised wasn't fair to me...or Lavender."

Harry blinked at this news. "Okay, I'm not sure I really want to know more about that."

Ginny laughed and stood up, grabbing Harry's hand to pull him up. "Come on, we'd better get back. You've got to be hungry after your day and Mum'll be just about ready to burst a blood vessel." She paused and grinned. "We'll just tell her we're dating now, that'll distract her."

Harry laughed and let her help pull him up and they headed down to the Great Hall.

Chapter 12

Severus Snape swirled the wine around in his glass and stared into the fire. He had chosen not to go down to the Great Hall for dinner this evening, preferring instead to dine in the privacy of his own quarters. This was in part as a relief from the incessant prattling of the children but mostly because he was expecting to be summoned tonight and he had no desire for the summons to come while in the middle of the Great Hall. He had been led to believe by the last communication he had had with that snivelling little rat that the summons would come far earlier in the evening than usual. This had led him to believe that he would indeed be allowed entry into the Dark Lord's inner sanctum. They traditionally met prior to the normal Death Eater gatherings.

He took another sip of the wine and stared moodily into the glass. He was not looking forward to this summoning and in combination with the news that he had to testify at the hearing into the events surrounding Potter's injury, it had had the effect of souring his mood quite considerably. Albus was attempting to ensure that he would only have to testify as a last resort. Whatever was said in the hearing would undoubtedly get out and how he would explain being at Potter's house that night to the Dark Lord was not something he wished to attempt. The explanation that the Headmaster had ordered it would possibly serve but he would likely lose any progress that he had made in worming his way back into the Dark Lord's good graces.

He shifted in his chair and grimaced. Potter; in the last few days his thoughts always seemed to come back to Potter. Much to his own annoyance. His awareness that he had gravely misjudged the boy rankled. He felt perfectly justified in his feelings about James Potter and his little group of sycophants but he wondered exactly when it was that he had started transferring those emotions to James' son. While it was true that he had been less than pleased to hear the news

of the imminent arrival of the Boy-Who-Lived, he had, if he recalled correctly, resolved to ignore the little brat as much as he could. Perhaps it had been that first sighting of Potter in the Great Hall, looking so young and scared...and so very much like James. He had not truly been prepared for that. Oh, it was true the boy had his mother's eyes but in every other physical facet he was James' son to the core. Perhaps that is what had done it, perhaps it was then he had assumed that because the boy looked so much like his father, he was going to act like his father.

Pain lanced through his forearm, disrupting his thoughts, and he dropped the wineglass. He swore and grabbed at his Mark until the pain subsided somewhat. He rose slowly from the chair, checked the time and gathered the robe and mask he had draped over the back earlier. He shook his head at being stuck wool gathering for so long and headed for the boundaries of Hogwarts as quickly as he could.

He apparated into a well-lit room, a drawing room by the look. Wormtail scuttled up to him.

"S...Severus, welcome," he whined. "The Master has asked me to escort you. You will not need your mask until later."

Snape nodded and removed his mask. He sneered at the cringing man in front of him and gestured for him to lead. Wormtail led him through the corridors of the house and into a private study. Voldemort sat behind the desk, with Lucius Malfoy sitting in the furthest of the three chairs in front of the desk. The personal belongings in the study indicated to Severus that he was now standing in Malfoy Manor. He walked into the study and kneeled before the Dark Lord.

"Rise, Severus," Voldemort said with a magnanimous wave of his hand, "and be seated."

Severus stood smoothly and sat himself in the chair closest to the door, an old habit he had never bothered to break. Wormtail scurried around him to sit in the middle chair. Severus eyed Lucius with some surprise. Lucius noticed the regard and smiled slyly.

"I still have some influence at the Ministry," he said smoothly, as though no further explanation was needed. Severus raised an eyebrow; it seemed money and influence was still more important to some in the Ministry than truth and the lives of others.

The Dark Lord had been watching this exchange with veiled amusement before settling back in his chair and flicking his fingers towards the three of them. Severus sat back into his seat and diverted his full attention to his Master, knowing that if he did not, the Dark Lord would no longer find things quite so amusing. Lucius quickly followed his lead.

"Severus, Lucius, Wormtail," Voldemort began, "I have chosen the three of you to help me succeed in my victory over Harry Potter. This plan will take some time to come to fruition and will depend greatly on you, my dear Severus." Snape bowed his head in acknowledgment and waited for his Master to continue. "Part you have already set in place. The potions you have provided and will continue to provide will be a key part of the plan. Lucius, you and Wormtail will have one task and one task only." He paused and his eyes became slitted, rage slowly kindling within them. His voice when he spoke again was a malevolent hiss. "Perhaps this time you will not fail."

The two men in question shivered and quickly fell to their knees, their heads bowed. Snape watched impassively as Voldemort rose sinuously and pulled out his wand. He continued to watch impassively as the Cruciatus curse was cast on the two men. As he did he realised that Potter was undoubtedly experiencing this and he shivered. Voldemort finally tired of his amusement and released the curses. He put his wand away and settled back into his seat. Lucius and Wormtail slowly pulled themselves back into their chairs and tried to minimise their shaking as much as possible.

Voldemort turned his attention to Severus. "How long until the remaining potions are ready, my dear Severus?"

"The veritaserum will take a couple more weeks, Lord. I did not have any left in stock and had only just started the process of brewing more. The other potion you required will not be ready for another two and a half months. I must be careful to keep Dumbledore from knowing what I am brewing. If he knew, he would have no choice but to summarily dismiss me." Severus paused, wondering how far he could push the Dark Lord. "Even having the knowledge to brew the Egeovenenum potion would be sufficient for him, let alone actually doing it."

Voldemort did not seem displeased. "Excellent, Severus. That will give Lucius and Wormtail time to instigate their part." He turned to the two men, who appeared to have recovered most of their composure. "Lucius, have you selected your target?"

"Yes, Lord. I have selected Archibald Croaker. I thought of using the Minister himself but Croaker will be far better. He is an Unspeakable

so his presence in the Department of Mysteries will not be questioned. It is his right to be there. He has a wife and two young children that can be used against him and he was friends with Broderick Bode. Apparently, the death of his friend under such...mysterious...circumstances has affected him considerably, according to my source. It should be simple to manipulate him appropriately."

The Dark Lord chuckled and steepled his fingers in front of his face. "Excellent! Set that in motion. I wish for that side of things to be ready the moment Severus' final potion is ready."

Lucius inclined his head in acknowledgement. "That will give me ample time," he said with satisfaction.

"Good," Voldemort hissed. "Set things up with this Croaker such that we may gain access to the Department of Mysteries at the moment of my choosing." Lucius nodded smoothly and the Dark Lord rose from his chair behind the desk. "Lucius, Wormtail, you will join me in the coming Revel. Severus, you are excused. Return to your potions, I do not wish any delays caused by carelessness."

The three men rose and bowed low before their Lord. Lucius Malfoy and Wormtail donned their masks and followed the Dark Lord out of the study. Severus remained bowed until all three had left. He straightened and shuddered as he realised the consequences of the mentioned Revel. He could only be thankful that the Dark Lord had deemed his potions more important than his attendance. The sudden flare of pain in the Dark Mark on his arm drove all other considerations out of his mind. Potter! The boy would surely have witnessed the meeting and suffered with the Cruciatus. Now with the Revel to come, the boy would have to witness the torture and

eventual killing of whatever muggles or muggleborn had been chosen to participate. He grimaced and made his way out of the study, knowing that Lucius would have anti-apparition wards on the room. As soon as he was in the corridor, he apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

He stripped off his Death Eater robe and mask and loped quickly back up to the castle, heading for the suite that Potter was sharing with Lupin. Taking the chance that the password had not been changed, he muttered "Golden snitch" and breathed a sigh of relief when the portrait opened. He went and opened the door to Potter's room and was startled to find that the boy was not there. He immediately went and knocked on the door to Lupin's room and opened it.

Remus was just sitting up when Snape opened the door and he was forced to squint his eyes against the sudden light. He had no trouble recognising the figure standing in his doorway.

"Severus? What do you want?" he asked in surprise; it was unlike the Potions Master to act so rudely.

"Where is Potter?" Snape demanded.

"He's up in Gryffindor tower with the others," Remus replied, mystified. "Why? What's wrong?"

Before Snape had time to answer, a loud banging came on the outer portrait door and both men heard a muffled voice yelling for Remus. The werewolf leapt out of bed, snatching up his dressing gown and wrapping it around himself. Severus stepped back from the door and allowed him to rush past.

Remus opened the portrait door to find a very breathless Neville, hopping from foot to foot outside. "Remus," he gasped. "Come quick! It's Harry! He just started screaming and grabbing at his scar."

Remus started in surprise and tore off down the corridor towards the Gryffindor tower, Neville hot on his heels. Snape stared after them for a moment and ran in the opposite direction, towards the dungeons.

When Remus crawled through the entrance hole, he found Harry lying curled up on the floor, sobbing with pain and clutching at his scar. Ginny was sitting on the floor as well; she had Harry's head and shoulders in her lap and her arms around him. She was rocking him gently backwards and forwards, murmuring soothing words. The other teens were watching with worry and concern in their eyes. All but Harry and Ginny looked up at Remus' entry.

"Hermione, what happened?" Remus asked quietly.

Hermione swallowed and dashed away her tears. "We were just talking, Remus, and all of a sudden he grabbed at his scar. Then he just started screaming." Her eyes filled with tears again and when Ron came up beside her and put his arm around her shoulder, she turned to him and started weeping. Ron looked startled and then carefully put both arms around the sobbing girl.

Remus walked over and knelt down beside Ginny. He placed a hand on her shoulder and she looked up, her eyes full of fear and worry.

"How long has he been like this?" he asked her, hoping to get a clearer answer.

"About ten minutes," she said calmly. "We waited for a few minutes before coming to get you. Ron and Hermione said that the pain usually goes away fairly quickly. He was pretty quiet at first but when he started screaming, we thought we'd better get you."

Remus opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by the entry of Professor Snape through the entrance hole. Snape had a couple of potion bottles in his hand. He ignored the surprised teens and headed directly towards Harry. His eyes flicked over the young couple sitting on the floor. He went to one knee and handed one of the bottles to Ginny.

"Pour this down his throat," he ordered and grabbed Harry's head. He prised the boy's jaw open and Ginny quickly uncorked the bottle and poured the contents into Harry's mouth. Snape pushed Harry's jaw shut again and stroked his throat to trigger his swallowing reflex. He settled back and watched the boy intently. After a few seconds, Harry relaxed and slumped into Ginny's arms, though tremors still ran through his body.

"Now this one," Snape said and handed the other bottle to Ginny. Again he prised Harry's jaw open and again Ginny poured the potion down his throat. Snape settled back to watch once more.

After about a minute, Harry relaxed a little further. Snape gestured sharply to Remus. "Let's put him on one of the couches, it will be more comfortable," he said.

Remus nodded and the two men lifted the semi-conscious boy off the floor and settled him on the nearest couch. Remus walked over to a cupboard against one wall and took a blanket out of it. He turned back and placed the blanket over Harry.

Ginny slowly rose from the floor, stretched her legs out and then walked over to the couch. She lifted Harry's head slightly and settled herself down. She shifted until Harry was resting comfortably against her. Remus watched this with a gentle and amused smile, remembering how many times he had seen James and Lily in a similar position. He then turned to Snape.

"You know what's happening to him," he said matter-of-factly.

Snape sighed and nodded. He collapsed into a chair opposite the couch. The teens were all surprised by his actions. They had never seen their Potions teacher act like this and settled themselves around the couch that Harry was lying on, watching Snape carefully. Remus sat on the arm of the couch and raised an eyebrow at Snape.

"The Dark Lord is holding a Revel tonight," Snape said flatly.

Remus winced and then looked confused. "What does this have to do with Harry?" he said and then gasped. Ron and Hermione's eyes widened.

"He's feeling that?" Hermione asked quietly. She hesitated for a long time and then asked with trepidation. "What would he be seeing?"

Snape turned to look at her, his face dark and forbidding. "You do not want to know, Miss Granger," he said tightly. "Mr Potter told me the other night that he feels it when the Dark Lord casts the Unforgivable curses and possibly others." He swept the assembled teens with a sharp glance. "Is this new?"

"I...I think so," Ron said, after a few moments thought. "He's always known when Vol..." He glanced at the Potions Master. "Er, You-Know-Who was really happy or angry or anything and he's had those visions but I can't remember him actually feeling the pain of You-Know-Who's curses." Ron grimaced. "Unless he didn't tell us."

Remus frowned. "It could be something new. Severus, you said that he told you about this the other night?" Snape nodded and Remus thought for a moment. "Albus mentioned that You-Know-You possessed Harry for a brief period during the...fracas in the Department of Mysteries. It may be that possession changed the nature of the link. We'll have to speak to Albus tomorrow."

Remus nodded to himself and then looked up at the Potions Master again. "What did you give him?"

"A muscle relaxant and a pain-reducing potion," Snape replied. "There is nothing else that can be done. The Revel is unlikely to last too much longer."

Remus stared at Snape for a long moment, looking as though he would like to ask a thousand questions but he chose to sit back and wait for Harry to recover.

After about 10 minutes, Harry began to shift slightly. Ginny's arms tightened around him.

"Harry?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

Harry moaned quietly and his eyes opened, staring blindly up towards the ceiling. "Ginny?" he whispered.

"Yes, Harry?" she said.

"Get Remus, Dumbledore and...and Snape, if he's back," he whispered and swallowed.

Remus got up and kneeled beside the couch. "Harry, I'm already here and so is Professor Snape."

"Dumbledore?" Harry whispered.

"I'll go and get him," Neville offered, looking relieved to have something to do. He quickly crawled through the entrance hole and they could hear him running up the corridor. The rest sat there and alternated between looking at each other and Harry.

"Professor Snape?" Harry whispered. "What potions did you give me?"

"A muscle relaxant and a pain-reducing potion," Snape replied.

"Thank you. They helped," Harry said and brought one hand up and laid it over Ginny's. The Weasley boys looked at their sister and Harry and then beamed at each other. Their reaction earlier had been exactly as Ginny had predicted and by now they had all settled on being thrilled underneath their worry.

Fairly shortly they heard the sounds of rapid footsteps outside the portrait and then Professor Dumbledore and Neville were crawling into the room. Neville collapsed on the floor, breathing heavily, while the Headmaster walked calmly over to the couch Harry was lying on. Remus quickly pulled a chair close for him and Dumbledore sat down. He looked at Ginny with a twinkle in his eye and she smiled shyly back at him.

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly, "you seem to be in quite an enviable situation right now." Harry laughed softly and Ginny blushed. "What did you need to tell me?"

"I had a vision. Voldemort was having a...a party of some kind. I don't know what else to call it," Harry said quietly.

"He calls it a...Revel," Snape said tightly.

Harry snorted. "A Revel. Right, of course. He...they killed some people. Muggles, I think. A family; husband, wife, two children. But that's not what I needed to tell you," Harry paused and took a deep breath. "I could...feel the curses. The Cruciatus and one other that I didn't quite catch the name of. It...it ripped the man apart." The other teens in the room gasped in horror. As Harry continued, his voice began to slur a little. "He cast...the Killing Curse. Merlin, that hurt. Fel' like someone hit me 'round the head with a sledgehammer. Prob'ly would have been worse if Pr'fessor Snape hadn't given me those potions."

Harry slumped back in Ginny's arms and breathed heavily, almost asleep. Dumbledore leaned forward and patted their joined hands.

"Thank you, my boy," he said with concern. "Now get some rest." He turned to Remus. "I think under the circumstances it might be best if Harry spent the night here in the tower. If you would take him up to

the dormitory and settle him in? Would you children like to go with him, please?"

The teens stood as Remus spelled Harry with Mobilicorpus and moved to take him upstairs. He paused though when Ron went to stand in front of the Headmaster, his face set.

"Professor Dumbledore?" he asked firmly. "I...We want to know what's happening. Not so we can interfere or do anything stupid." Snape snorted and Ron gave a half-grin. "I know we have before but not this time. We need to know to make sure we don't do anything stupid. We're involved in this now, sir, whether you or we like it or not. I think the others will agree with me when I say that we won't tell anyone else anything that we hear tonight. You know Harry told us about the prophecy and we'll be damned if we're going to let Harry face any of this alone. I know he wants to protect us but this is our decision. We're involved, as much as anyone else who is in the Order because we are Harry's friends and the only way to make us uninvolved would be for us to stop being his friends." Ron paused and there was uncharacteristic steely glint in his eyes. "And that is not going to happen."

Dumbledore considered the determined young man standing in front of him and was just about to answer when he was interrupted.

"Mr Weasley has a point, Albus," Professor Snape said dryly, much to the utter shock of the teens. They all looked at each other and then back at their professor, wondering if they had heard him correctly. "You will undoubtedly inform Mr Potter of what I have to tell you and he will inevitably tell his friends," he continued archly. "Why not circumvent this and make sure that their information is accurate."

Dumbledore looked at Snape with a twinkle in his eye and a smile playing around his lips. Snape scowled and crossed his arms, glaring around the room as though daring them to comment on his unusual suggestion.

The Headmaster nodded. "What a good suggestion, Severus," he said with amusement. "Let us then see if we can wake Harry. You might as well tell this tale only once."

An intrigued Remus nodded and moved Harry back to the couch, where Ginny was still sitting. He settled the young man back down and Ginny shook him gently.

"Harry?" she said. "Do you think you can wake up a little?"

"Mmmhmmm," Harry murmured and shifted slightly. He opened his eyes a fraction to let everyone know he really was awake. "Wasn't really asleep. Just dozing."

Ginny grinned. "Well, don't start dozing again. The Headmaster and Professor Snape need to talk to all of us."

Harry took a deep breath and opened his eyes wider. He sat up a little further. "Okay," he said as brightly as he could. "See, I'm awake, really!"

There were chuckles from many in the room and the Headmaster leaned forward slightly.

"Harry, can you give us a more detailed explanation of what happened?" he asked gently.

"Okay," Harry said agreeably and frowned in concentration. "I got a really sharp flare of pain in my scar and I could sense that Voldemort was really pleased. Not pleased-happy but pleased-smug. Then I could see what was happened from his point of view. He was in what looked like a ballroom or something and all the Death Eaters started appearing. He turned and spoke to the two Death Eaters next to him and..." Harry gasped and growled. "I could only hear the voices but I know that one of those next to him was Wormtail and the other was Lucius Malfoy!"

"How is that possible?" Hermione said angrily. "He was captured. Isn't he supposed to be in Azkaban?"

"It seems his influence in the Ministry has seen him released, Miss Granger," Snape said with a sneer that for once wasn't directed at her. "Money apparently can buy anything."

There were disgusted and exasperated looks and remarks from all those in the room though Harry just looked angry.

"Anyway," Harry continued, "Voldemort asked them to bring in the entertainment and they left the room. He welcomed all of the Death Eaters, said some rubbish about how they were going to take over the world and then welcomed them all to the Revel. That was when Malfoy and Wormtail came back in with a family. I think they were muggles." Harry swallowed and started to look distressed. "He...they all tortured that family. Voldemort did most of it. They...they all seemed to think it was some kind of game."

Snape sighed and slowly closed his eyes. "They do think its fun, Mr Potter, hence the reason it is called a Revel," he said with a surprising lack of acidity. The teens looked at him with surprise that gradually began to fade into horror as they realised that in his role of spy, he may have had to participate in such things.

"You weren't there," Harry said calmly.

"No," Snape agreed. "My...distaste...for such things is well known. The Dark Lord insisted I return to my potions, though nobody would have expected me there unless ordered."

"Isn't that a bit of a cop out?" asked Ron angrily.

"And what precisely would you have me do, Mr Weasley?" Snape asked sharply. "Rush in and do something stupidly Gryffindor as to stage a rescue attempt? And get both myself and those muggles killed?"

Ron opened his mouth to argue but then quickly shut it and looked a little shame-faced. "I'm sorry, Professor, I...I didn't think about that," he said quietly.

Snape raised an eyebrow in surprise but nodded in acceptance. "Mr Potter, I think it pointless and cruel to ask you to relive the Revel," he said abruptly. "It was undoubtedly brutal and disgusting and best forgotten as soon as possible." He leaned forward, his face intent. "Was the Revel all you saw, Mr Potter? From the moment of the summoning by the Dark Lord?"

Harry nodded and looked confused. "Well, there was a moment a bit earlier when I felt some pain but that went away pretty quickly so I didn't think anything of it. Why?"

Snape leaned back and steepled his fingers in front of his face. "The Dark Lord issued two summons tonight," he said calmly. "The first was earlier in the evening, probably when you felt that first jab of pain; the second was the general summons to all Death Eaters for the Revel." He paused and swept the teenagers in the room with a withering glare. "I trust that anything I tell you tonight will not become a subject for general discussion."

The teens winced at the glare, all of the Gryffindors in particular had seen it before and it did not bode well for those who were disobedient.

"Ickle Ronniekins was right, Professor," Fred said, ducking a cushion thrown by his younger brother.

"We're in this for the long haul," George continued, grabbing the cushion and throwing it back at Ron. "Harry's kind of our little brother now in more ways than one and our family sticks together."

"Well said," Fred complimented his twin.

"Thank you," George replied with a bow. "Anyway I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we won't blab."

Snape gave the two of them an exasperated glare, thankful that at least he would no longer have to deal with these two Weasleys anymore but finally nodded in acknowledgement.

"That pain you felt earlier in the evening was a private summoning, Mr Potter," Snape said. "Wormtail, Lucius Malfoy and I were summoned to a meeting." Snape turned to face the Headmaster. "Albus, the Dark Lord has given Lucius instructions to compromise Archibald Croaker. I do not know his exact purpose but he wishes to be able to obtain access to the Department of Mysteries whenever he wishes."

Both the Headmaster and Harry frowned at this.

"But why?" asked Harry. "The prophecy is gone so he can't be after that." He stopped, wondering if he'd just made a fool of himself.

"There are any number of things held in the Department of Mysteries that he might be interested in," said Dumbledore calmly, "but nothing that I can think of that might be that important. Severus, did he give any indication of what he may be after?"

Snape thought for a moment then shook his head. "No, but whatever is happening, it requires the potions I am brewing. They are clearly not for Lucius to use. Whatever he wants to do in the Department of Mysteries, it will start when that final potion I am brewing is ready in two and half months."

"Well, that gives us a little time," the Headmaster said with relief. "I shall speak with Kingsley, he will know what we can do about Croaker. In the mean time, Severus, do you have any theories as to why Harry saw the Revel but not the meeting?"

Snape frowned. "I have been thinking about that since it became clear that Mr Potter had not seen the meeting. The only thing I can put it down to is that fact that Lucius' study is heavily warded. Though that is not much of an explanation when you consider how heavily warded Hogwarts is and particularly when you consider that the Dark Lord cast two Cruciatus curses during the meeting."

"Most curious," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "How are Harry's Occlumency lessons progressing?"

"Satisfactorily," Snape replied. "He is capable of detecting my presence and expelling me from his mind. He is still not able to prevent me from entering but the small amount of time it takes to

detect and expel me makes that inability negligible. I suspect he will be able to deny others access to his mind completely before the new school year starts."

"And yet he is still getting the visions from Voldemort," Dumbledore mused. "Clearly something has changed in the nature of the link. Harry, are you able to tell the difference between the visions and your own thoughts?"

"Yes," Harry said slowly. "They feel different, as though they're being imposed on me from outside and they feel real, if that makes any sense. Like they're really happening." He paused for a long moment. "I don't think I would be fooled by that vision of S...Sirius if I had it now."

Dumbledore nodded. "Do you think you could block or expel those visions?"

"I...I don't know," Harry said thoughtfully. "I haven't tried. It usually hurts so much that it's hard to concentrate. I could try next time."

"Yes, it might be wise to do so," the Headmaster said and then stood. "Now children, unless anybody has any urgent questions I think it might be best to let Harry get some rest. Harry, do you think you could make it back to the suite or would you like to stay here?"

"I don't think I could walk much past the Fat Lady's portrait," Harry said wearily. "I think I'd better stay here."

"Very well. Remus if you would help Harry upstairs and then could you join Severus and I in my office."

Remus nodded and Dumbledore and Snape left the common room. Remus pulled Harry to his feet and helped him up the stairs, closely followed by the other teens. When they got up to the Gryffindor's dorm he settled Harry onto his bed.

"I'll be alright from here, Remus," Harry said with a small smile.

"Are you sure?" Remus asked and when Harry nodded and the others assured him, he left the room and headed downstairs.

There was a long silence and then Ron spoke up. "Alright, who was that and what has he done with Professor Snape?"

The eight teenagers laughed, successfully breaking the tension that the explanations downstairs had built up.

"I think that was Professor Snape treating us like adults," Harry said laughing. "When I went down to see him, he decided to do that though he did say if I started acting like a child again, he would very quickly return to treating me like one. Maybe he decided to extend that to all of you too."

There were a lot of serious looks around the room as the realisation of what they were getting into settled on them.

"Maybe you ought to tell us what was said in that meeting, Harry," Hermione asked.

Harry nodded and began to speak.

Chapter 13

"Again," Master Nhean ordered.

Harry wiped the sweat out of his eyes and began the sequence of movements again. He had started his physical training yesterday. Master Nhean had said at the time that in light of the revelation that Voldemort had plans to start something in two and a half months, it might be best if he had some knowledge under his belt. So they had started what Harry had quickly come to call his 'torture sessions'. Master Nhean had not wanted him to do any muggle-type training; he wanted to train Harry's muscles to what they needed to do, to establish what he had called 'muscle memory'. Thus the practice routines; a set sequence of movements that Master Nhean said came from the ideas behind Tai Chi. Slow precise movements that required a great deal of control to accomplish.

The hours of learning some of the routines yesterday had been compounded by having to do those same routines today with Oversight active. He had been warned that tomorrow he had better have his wand with him as he would be required to run the routines, have Oversight active and cast a few spells. He had been given a reprieve from wandless magic for the moment. Master Nhean felt combining the three forms of torture would be sufficient for now; any further wandless magic could wait.

His head was pounding as he moved through the final sequence of the current routine and Harry wished he could just drop to the ground. However, having done that once yesterday, he was not keen to get a repeat of the lecture and extra hour of training he had gotten as punishment. He came to a halt and held the final position as he saw the energy shape that was his Master circle around him.

"Well done," Master Nhean said, well pleased by Harry's discipline. "Sit down and have a rest. Don't drop your Oversight!"

Harry dropped cross-legged to the mats on the floor and groaned. "But Master, my head..."

Master Nhean smiled kindly. "I know, Harry, but think of your Oversight as kind of like a muscle. When you start exercising a muscle, it gets very sore very quickly but if you keep doing the exercise the muscle stops getting sore and becomes stronger. Understand?"

Harry sighed and nodded and flexed his wrists and elbows. Master Nhean walked over to the sole remaining table in the room and poured a glass of water. He brought it over to Harry, who drank it down gladly. Nhean took the glass back to the table.

"Now, my boy, up you get," he ordered and Harry hauled himself up with a groan. "I have a new routine for you to learn."

Master Nhean walked over and stood in front of Harry and began to demonstrate the sequence of movements. Harry tried to concentrate past his headache and began to mimic his Master's actions. It took four run-throughs for him to feel that he had the sequence right and then Master Nhean stepped back to watch him run it through on his own.

"Good work," Master Nhean said as Harry successfully completed the sequence.

"It's an extension of the others, isn't it?" Harry said, breathing heavily.

"Correct. Each sequence of movements, or kata as they are known, builds on the former," Nhean said approvingly. "There are 21 katas in all. They have been taken from the many types of martial arts that exist. Sato wished to take the best of what was available for his Warriors and subsequent generations of Guild members have done the same. Most of the katas can be used for both unarmed and armed combat."

Harry listened with interest. "Will you be teaching the same things to my friends?"

"Yes. In fact, tell them that if they wish to begin their training, they might want to turn up here at the same time as you do tomorrow."

Harry grinned. Two days advantage wasn't much but he was pretty sure it was going to make some kind of difference.

Master Nhean chuckled at the expression on Harry's face. "I rather thought that's how you would feel," he said blandly. "Now run through the first kata for me and then you may go."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. He started the sequence of movements and moved smoothly through them, only pausing once when he forgot the next move. He finished smoothly though and Master Nhean dismissed him with a compliment. He wandered over to the table and picked up his cane. As he made his way out of the room he dropped his Oversight with a sigh of relief. He turned towards the suite for a shower but after a quick thought, changed his mind and headed down to the dungeons.

Harry walked down into the cool depths of the dungeons and knocked on the door to the Potions classroom. He heard Professor Snape's voice telling him to enter and opened the door.

"Professor Snape? I'm sorry to disturb you but I was wondering if you had a headache potion I could use?" Harry said politely. Politeness had become something of a standard with them these days. While they still snarled at each other on occasion, the rest of the time they were civil. It was a welcome change, though Harry knew it would not last past the start of school. With the return of the Slytherin students, they would have to go back to the sniping and unpleasantness unless they were sure that they could not be overheard. Harry found that he wasn't really looking forward to this. While he and Snape had not worked through all the bad blood between them by any means, he had found that it was much easier learning things from Snape when they were both being polite.

"Yes, I do," Snape said, breaking into his train of thought, "though you could have got one from Madam Pomfrey just as easily."

Harry shivered. "I know, sir, but I think I've just about had enough of the hospital wing, thank you very much."

Much to Harry's surprise, Snape chuckled. "I suspect you have," he said in a dry voice and Harry heard him opening his office door. "Here you are, Mr Potter, drink that."

Snape handed him a small potion bottle and Harry quickly uncorked it and drank it down. He waited a few seconds and sighed with relief as it started to take effect. He handed the bottle back to the Potions Master.

"Thank you, sir," he said with relief as the pounding in his head began to fade.

"You are welcome," Snape said and they both turned back to their original plans. Harry paused at the door as a thought occurred to him.

"Sir?" he asked hesitantly. "If you don't mind telling me, what is the other potion that you have to brew for Vol...er, the Dark Lord? The one that's going to take so long."

There was a long silence in the room before Snape answered. "And why would you want to know that, Mr Potter?" he said carefully.

Harry paused and decided that an honest answer would probably be the best. "I suppose its just mostly plain curiosity, sir," he said with a sigh. "I don't really know what I'd do with the answer. I guess if I had to give you a good reason, I'd say that it's because I want to be prepared in case it's me he wants to give the potion to."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I will have to think about that, Mr Potter."

Harry shrugged. "That's okay, sir. I suppose I don't really need to know unless it becomes necessary. I'd just like to be forewarned even if there is nothing that I can do about it."

"That is not the reason I hesitated, Mr Potter," Snape said with a certain amount of discomfort. "Should I decide to tell you, I will also inform you of the reasons for my hesitation."

Harry nodded thoughtfully and continued out the door. He planned on having a shower and informing his friends of the end of their days of rest and relaxation.

The next day saw all eight teens waiting in the Guild classroom. Harry had told them the night before that Master Nhean was expecting to see them the next day and they had been so excited that they had been waiting outside the classroom for Harry when he had arrived from his Occlumency lessons. He'd shaken his head with amusement and let them in. They'd been surprised when they saw the classroom.

All the furniture but for one table had been removed and soft mats covered the floor. Harry had immediately gone to lean his cane against the table and triggered his Oversight. He moved back into the classroom and began the warm-up exercises that he been shown.

"Er, Harry? Should we be doing that too?" Ron asked a little nervously.

"Well, I suppose you don't have to," answered Harry with a grin, "but you might find things go a little easier today if you do."

The others looked at each other with dawning misapprehensions and immediately began mimicking Harry's moves. Harry had just finished when Master Nhean walked in. He shrugged out of his outer robe and placed it on the table.

"Ah, excellent!" he said with a smile. "It's wonderful to see you all here. Have you all warmed up?"

Harry and the others nodded.

"Good," Master Nhean said. "Now, Harry, begin by running through the katas you learnt in the last two days. I assume you have your Oversight active." Harry nodded and Master Nhean turned to face the others. "Now I want you others to watch me carefully and mimic my movements. I am going to teach you the basics of the martial arts of the Guild. You will begin by learning the katas. These are a series of movements designed to train and strengthen the muscles of your

body. There is no advantage in being male or female in doing these katas. It relies only on the strength of your mind and your muscles. There is to be no competition in this classroom. Each of you will progress at your own pace, for each of you is different and will master things at different paces. Now, we will begin."

Slowly the teens began to try and mimic the Night Master's moves. They were all rather awkward at first, particularly when they saw Harry performing the same moves. While Harry wasn't moving as flawlessly as Master Nhean, he was clearly fairly comfortable with what he was doing. The three girls picked things up the quickest, gradually gaining confidence in their movements. Ron had the most difficulty; he struggled with even the simplest move and even nearly fell a few times. After the last near fall, he growled in frustration and sighed gustily, trying to concentrate on what Master Nhean was doing. He looked up to find the diminutive Master smiling at him sympathetically.

"Do not fret, Ron," Nhean said soothingly. "You have recently gone through a growth spurt, have you not?" Ron nodded. "And now you feel clumsy, like you don't know what your hands and feet are going to do next?"

Ron nodded glumly. "I keep falling over my own feet and knocking things over if I'm not concentrating."

"It will pass," Nhean said kindly. "I know you feel awkward now but think of it as your body preparing itself for the man you will be. Give yourself time to adjust to your new height and don't be ashamed of it. Stand up to your inches, Ron. And persevere with the katas, they will help you establish your balance within your growing body."

Ron gave a wry half-grin and set himself to try the kata again, relieved that his brothers were far more interested in what they were doing than tormenting him over his clumsiness.

When Master Nhean was sure that the teens were comfortable with what they were doing, he issued instructions for them to repeat the first kata until they could run it through flawlessly and turned back to Harry. He was just finishing the last of the katas he had learnt when Nhean walked over to him.

"Good, Harry," Nhean said. "Now I trust you brought your wand with you today."

There were a few startled glances from the others in the room as Harry pulled his wand out of his back pocket.

"Good, now when I tell you I want you to cast the Lumos spell," Nhean ordered and Harry nodded. "Now run through the first kata."

Harry began the same sequence that the others were doing. Master Nhean allowed him to settle into s groove and then he said, "Now."

Harry blinked. "Lumos," he said and promptly fell over, completely distracted from the kata by the appearance of spell in Oversight.

Nhean chuckled as he walked over and pulled Harry to his feet. "Rather spectacular in Oversight, hmmm? Just as well I started you off on something as simple as Lumos."

Harry nodded and then laughed. "Now I know what you meant when you said each spell looks and feels different. Are they all going to be as spectacular as that?"

"What did you see?" Hermione said with intense interest. "Oh, I'm sorry, Master Nhean. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's quite alright, my dear," Nhean said with amusement.

Harry grinned; he'd had a lot of experience with Hermione's drive for knowledge. "It was all rainbow colours," he said with delight. "A huge spray of rainbow coloured energy."

"Oh, well, I suppose that makes sense," Hermione said in a very academic tone. "After all white light, which is what you get when you cast the Lumos spell, is made up of all the colours of light."

"Uh, okay, Hermione," Harry said slowly. "I'll take your word for it."

Hermione scowled at him and threw her arms up in the air with a frustrated exclamation when she realised he couldn't see her expression.

Harry chuckled; he had a fairly good idea of how Hermione had reacted to his comment and what he had heard seemed to confirm that reaction. "Don't worry, Hermione," he said with a laugh. "That's just about how Professor Snape reacts when he realises that scowling at me is useless now." He gave her a very cheeky grin.

Hermione started to scowl again but changed her mind and laughed along with everyone else. "Well then," she said with an impish grin. "I'll have to start doing this then." With that comment she walked over to Harry and whacked him fairly firmly on the arm.

"Ow!" Harry yelped and rubbed his arm. "Come on, Ginny, are you going to let her beat up your boyfriend?" he said with amused indignation.

Ginny pretended to consider the matter. "Hmmm, let me see. Yes, I think I will," she said with a grin.

"Typical," Harry said with a grumpy expression but suppressing his laughter. "Women always stick together don't they?"

Everyone finally gave into their laughter until Master Nhean clapped his hands. "Alright everybody," he said with amusement. "Now that we've established the true order of things, let's get back to work."

The teens got themselves back under control and, with a few sporadic splutters of laughter, went back to what they were doing. Nhean got Harry to start from the beginning again and established the timing of the casting of the Lumos spell.

"Now, did you get the timing of the spell casting," Nhean asked.

Harry nodded. "Every fourth change of movement."

"Good, now try the same thing with the other katas you have learnt," Nhean said and then moved back to the others. He watched them for a few minutes. They all seemed to have mastered the first kata and were performing it with a reasonable amount of fluidity. Hermione and Ginny were doing the best along with a very determined and dogged Neville. Luna was doing reasonably well, though she seemed to be continually distracted by watching the others. The twins were doing well but were spending too much time trying to match their movements to each other than trying to establish their own rhythm. Ron was the most awkward of them all but even he was able to perform credibly, particularly when he chose to concentrate only on what he was doing and ignored the others.

Nhean clapped his hands together to get their attention. "Good, finish the kata and then take a seat." One by one the teens finished and dropped to the floor with relief. They weren't used to this kind of exercise and found that despite the slow pace, it was extremely strenuous. When the last of them was seated, he stepped between them and Harry to make sure he had their complete attention. "Now

Hermione, Ginny, Neville, well done. With continued practice, I expect you will become very proficient in the martial arts. Luna, Fred, George, the three of you did well when you chose to concentrate on what you were doing. Luna, when you are performing a kata your attention must be wholly focused on what you are doing, just as it would have to be in a battle. You need to work on this; you were far too easily distracted by what everyone else was doing. Fred, George, you need to work at your own pace. I know twins often like to do everything the same but you two, like Luna, must focus on what you are doing, not what anyone else is doing. Ron, we've spoken about your temporary awkwardness so I don't need to rehash that. Suffice to say, when you allowed yourself to forget that the others were there and became focused on your routine, you did well. It was only when you allowed your focus to drift that the awkwardness became an issue."

He paused and looked at all of the teens in turn. "Focus! That is what you must learn. It is probably one of the most important assets you can have in a battle. If you are focused then you have the ability to ignore things that can get you and others killed. It allows you to ignore distraction and to concentrate on your objectives. It is not easy to learn, I can assure you, but it is one of the most important lessons I will teach you."

The teens looked at him sombrely as they once again had the seriousness of what they were now involved in brought home to them. Master Nhean did not let them dwell on it though. He clapped his hands again.

"Now, everyone up!" he said. "We will move onto the second kata."

The teens groaned and stood, spreading themselves out and centring their attention on Master Nhean.

Fred turned to his twin. "Tell me again why we volunteered to do this?" George just groaned and waved helplessly at his twin as grins graced the faces of the others.

Dinner was an unusually quiet affair. Not even Fred and George had the energy to play any jokes, in fact, all of them, including Harry, seemed to find it took everything they had just take their forks from their plates to their mouths. The adults were a bit wary at first and then increasingly confused. They kept glancing at the teens and then at Master Nhean, who seemed to be finding the whole thing terribly amusing. Finally, amusement began to rise amongst the other adults as they came to the realisation that the training was what had so effectively silenced the normally noisy end of the table. When dinner finally came to an end, none of the teens could seem to face the idea of actually getting up and sat slumped, staring at each other with woebegone and exhausted expressions.

Nhean smiled sympathetically at the teens. He had put them through a solid workout today. They were late in starting this kind of training so he knew he would have to be very hard on them at the start to bring them up to an appropriate level as quickly as possible. Harry looked the best of the lot but he'd had a couple of days to get used to the exercise. He was however about to disappoint the young man.

"Harry?" he asked. "Are you finished?"

Harry started in surprise and turned towards his Master. "Er, yes," he blurted. "Er, why?"

"Because you have your first Potions lesson tonight," came the answer

Harry groaned and Ron patted him slowly and sympathetically on the back. "Bad luck, mate," Ron said. "We'll think of you while we're soaking our bones in hot water."

Harry rolled his eyes and elbowed his friend in the ribs. "Thanks," he said dryly.

Snape smirked and rose from the table as did Master Nhean. "Come along, Harry," Nhean said and Harry slowly got to his feet.

The three of them made their way down to the dungeons where Snape led them to a room next to the Potions classroom.

"I have set this room up for you, Nhean," Snape said. "I have ensured that the cupboard is fully stocked and that you have all the equipment you asked for."

"Thank you, Severus," Nhean said. Snape nodded and leaned against a wall.

Harry became a little nervous when he realised that Snape wasn't leaving but had his attention brought back to where it should be when Master Nhean spoke.

"Harry, come and sit down here while I get things ready."

Harry walked over to where his Master was and fumbled his way into a seat in front of a desk. As he ran his hands over the desk, he realised that the room was set up in a similar fashion to the Potions classroom. He heard his Master walk away and open a cupboard.

"Master?" he asked in an attempt to settle himself down. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course," Nhean said as he began to set things up. "What did you want to know?"

"Erm, when am I going to learn what all the energy colours mean? It's just that I saw my friend's energy colours today and I kind of want to know what it all means," he said nervously.

Nhean raised an eyebrow and smiled. He had been wondering when Harry was going to push for that instruction. Guild instructors never initiated those lessons; the Warrior had to ask for them when they

were ready to learn. "I suppose we could start tomorrow. It will be a good lesson on how to do something and retain your focus."

Harry grinned wryly. Master Nhean was very good at combining lessons. It occasionally made things challenging but was always interesting. He stopped grinning when his Master stopped puttering around and stood in front of the desk.

"Okay, Harry, in front of you are a number of potion ingredients. Nothing dangerous to handle, of course. I want you to try and identify each ingredient using touch and smell but no Oversight."

Harry sighed and groped for the first ingredient.

An hour later he was exhausted. This exercise was one of the most difficult he had ever done. Potions wasn't his favourite subject at the best of times. Each time he successfully identified an ingredient, Master Nhean would immediately quiz him on how it could be used. Actually identifying the ingredients wasn't too difficult but he was lucky if he could answer half the questions afterwards. He was just thankful that Snape had decided not to make any comments, though he could feel the sneer from across the room every time he got an answer wrong. Finally Master Nhean called a halt to the lesson.

"Hmm, well that could have been worse, I suppose," he said musingly. "Actually identifying the ingredients didn't give you too many problems but your knowledge of what to do with them is severely lacking. I'd like you to do some reading on the subject, Harry. I'm not expecting you to become an expert but I would like you to have the ability to brew some of the simpler potions."

Harry sighed and nodded. Master Nhean patted him on the shoulder and dismissed him. Harry slowly made his way out of the room and the Night Master began to clean up.

"I see what you mean, Severus," he said as he put things away. "His knowledge is very spotty but there is potential there."

Snape nodded and grimaced. "I confess I am...probably not the best of teachers. I lack the patience to deal with the truly ignorant but Potter frustrates me. He lacks concentration and the ability to apply himself. Prior to his blinding I believed he had the ability to become truly proficient in the art of potion making."

"Well, I suspect that may change," Nhean said calmly. "A great deal of the training I will be doing for both Harry and his friends involves learning how to focus their concentration such that they do not get distracted by the extraneous. I daresay that may improve their class work as well. Hermione, Ginny and Neville are showing signs of being quite proficient."

Snape snorted in disbelief. "In the case of Mr Longbottom I shall believe it when I see it."

Master Nhean smiled and put the last of the ingredients back into the cupboard. "I do believe that Neville will surprise you in the end, Severus. I really do."

The shaggy-haired man wandered through the grey mist, growling almost continuously in frustration. He had been wandering around this grey, featureless land for who knows how long and he had seen nothing and no one.

"I can't be the only person here," he growled angrily. He stopped and breathed heavily, trying to control his temper. Finally it broke. "WHERE IS EVERYONE?" he bellowed.

The mist swirled around him but no one answered. He slumped down to the ground and scrubbed his face with his hands. Tears welled in his eyes and he slumped backwards until he was lying flat on his back.

"Haven't felt so goddam helpless since that night listening to Harry explain how Voldemort came back," he muttered and then sat bolt upright in shock.

Harry? Who was Harry? As he thought this, one of the faces he could remember floated into his mind. It was the one with intensely green eyes. Is that Harry, he wondered and decided that it must be. Now who is Voldemort? He sat there thinking hard but nothing came back to him other than a sense of anger. Does that mean I'm angry at Voldemort? He shook his head and tried to remember more. Just as he was about to give it up, a word floated to the surface. Sirius. He rolled the word around his mouth and as he did he became convinced

that it was his name. My name is Sirius, he thought and was pleased with how right it sounded.

"My name is Sirius," he said with a barking laugh.

"Yes, it is," came the pleased, hissing reply and Sirius jolted to his feet in fright, whirling around trying to find who had spoken.

"Who...who are you?" he stammered.

"A friend."

Sirius rolled his eyes. What a helpful answer. "Well, friend, I don't suppose you know where I am and how I can get out of here?" he asked a touch sarcastically.

The voice hissed laughter. "You are in limbo, Sirius. Neither dead nor alive. But I can change that; I can get you out of there."

"How?" Sirius asked pleadingly. "And when?"

"Patience, Sirius. The solution is not simple but it can be done. It will take some time before I am ready but, I promise you, I will get you out. You have things that need to be done."

"What?" Sirius asked. "Who am I? I...I can't remember anything."

"Do not fret, Sirius," the voice hissed. "You will remember in time and when I have freed you, I will help you remember what is important."

"Okay," Sirius said as he ran a hand through his shaggy hair. "I guess I can wait then."

"Good. Now have patience."

"Hello?" Sirius said but received no reply. He sat back down and wondered whether he had just imagined that conversation. He decided that it was better to assume he hadn't and settled in to wait.

Chapter 14

The next day dawned bright and cheerful, which most of the sighted residents at Hogwarts thought was completely inappropriate. It was Ron however who first articulated it.

"Look at that!" he said indignantly as they gathered in the Entrance Hall after breakfast. The doors were open and they could see the blue sky and beautiful weather outside.

Harry turned towards him. "What?" he asked as Ginny came and wormed her way under his arm. He settled his arm firmly around her shoulders as Ron groped for an answer.

"Er, well, the weather's great out there, Harry, and we're going to be stuck in a courtroom all day. Not that we're not going, of course," he said hastily. "It's just that why couldn't it have been miserable today, then I'd feel smug about being stuck in a dry room all day."

Harry frowned as he tried to make some kind of sense of that. "Ooookay," he finally said but was interrupted by the arrival of Remus before he could tease Ron any further.

"Alright, children, is everyone ready?" Remus asked, slightly anxiously. "Professor Dumbledore and the others will be here in just a moment."

"Remus?" Harry asked. "How are we getting there?"

"By Portkey. Professor Dumbledore thought it would be best," Remus replied and then hesitated. "Apparently the news that you would be appearing at the Wizengamot was leaked and the press are circling like sharks. They don't know why you're going to be there but just the fact that you are has them scenting a story."

Harry and his friends groaned. "At least Rita will behave herself," Hermione muttered smugly and Ron, who was standing close enough to hear her, laughed. Before anyone could question Ron, the Headmaster, Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey walked into the Entrance Hall, with the Headmaster carrying a cricket bat under one arm. Mrs Weasley had already left, as she had wanted to meet with her husband before the hearing.

The Headmaster walked up to Harry and placed one hand on his shoulder. "Now, Harry, are you sure you want to go today? There is no requirement for you to do so," he asked kindly.

Harry squared his shoulders as Ginny wrapped her arms around his waist. "Yes, Headmaster, I want to go," he said firmly.

Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder and then guided one of his hands onto the cricket bat. "If you would all make sure you are touching some part of this," he said and the rest jostled around until all were touching the bat. "We'll be off then." This phrase activated the portkey and they all felt the distinctive pull around their navel. When the pull ended, they all stumbled and caught at each other to

retain their balance. They had appeared near the fountain in the foyer of the Ministry and Dumbledore quickly led them all over to the security desk to have their wands checked. After that formality, the Headmaster led them through the golden gates and into a lift. Their party filled an entire lift and when the doors closed and the lift started to rise, Dumbledore turned to face them all.

"Now I have managed to get this hearing declared closed. That means that there will be no media present and the room will be spelled so that what goes on inside will not be allowed to be spoken of outside the room except by Professor McGonagall or myself. Even the members of the Wizengamot will not be able to speak of it." Harry sighed with relief, a sound that was echoed by Snape. "I do not believe you will be required to give testimony, Harry, but since you will actually be present, the Wizengamot may choose to ask you some questions. Just be honest. You children will be sitting in the public gallery with Mr and Mrs Weasley. Madam Pomfrey, Professor Snape, Remus and I will be elsewhere."

The lift came to a halt and the Headmaster led the party out into the corridor where they were met by Arthur and Molly Weasley. The teens were hustled off down the corridor by Mr and Mrs Weasley and into a large courtroom. There were gasps of surprise from some of the teens and they took their seats. Ron sat on Harry's left with Hermione sitting beyond him and Ginny sat on his right and gripped his hand. Fred and George took seats behind them and Neville and Luna sat in front. Mr and Mrs Weasley took seats next to the twins. Shortly after they sat, the sounds of murmuring in the courtroom died down.

Ron leaned over and whispered into Harry's ear. "There are only 10 of the Wizengamot members here and your Aunt, Uncle and cousin are sitting on chairs in the middle of the room. Kingsley Shacklebolt's standing guard over them. Your relatives look like they're about to be

sick but they aren't complaining which from what you've told us is a bit odd. Oh, hang on, oh okay, well, I'd say from the look your Uncle just gave Kingsley they've been intimidated pretty badly. I guess they're too scared to say anything." Harry smiled weakly at Ron and turned back towards the court.

Ron fell silent as the witch sitting in the middle of the row of Wizengamot members stood. She cleared her throat. "The Wizengamot will come to order." Harry started and then relaxed as he recognised the voice of Madam Bones. "Familial court hearing of the fourth of August into the neglect and abuse of Harry James Potter by Vernon Michael Dursley, Petunia Rose Dursley and Dudley Andrew Dursley. Interrogator: Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Court Scribe: Percy Ignatius Weasley. Witnesses for the prosecution: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Severus Septimius Snape, Remus Julius Lupin, Poppy Elizabeth Pomfrey. The accused will speak as their own witnesses. Under the circumstances, the Wizengamot has decreed the use of Veritaserum. The witnesses for the prosecution will speak and be questioned first. First witness: Remus Julius Lupin."

Madam Bones sat down and Remus was led in from a door at the side of the courtroom by an Auror and was seated in a chair opposite the Dursleys. He glanced at them and was pleased to see that they were pale with fright. Vernon Dursley had even gone beyond pale; he was almost green.

Madam Bones rose again with a sheaf of parchment in her hand and stepped down to the floor of the room. She walked up to Remus.

"Full name?" Madam Bones asked.

"Remus Julius Lupin," Remus replied calmly.

"Your current place of residence?"

"I currently reside at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"And you are a registered werewolf?"

"Yes," Remus replied quietly.

"Your reason for residing at Hogwarts?" Madam Bones asked.

"I am doing some consulting work for Professor Dumbledore over the summer and he offered rooms for me while I was doing that," Remus answered.

"Very well," Madam Bones said, ticking off some points on her parchment. "Please tell us what happened on the night in question."

Remus took a deep breath. "The wards surrounding the Dursleys were triggered at about 9 o'clock but in a rather confusing way. Albus...Professor Dumbledore...couldn't work out exactly what was

wrong. I volunteered to go and check on Harry. Professor Dumbledore insisted that I be accompanied. Professor Snape was the only teacher available so he came with me. When we arrived in Privet Drive, we found the house dark and apparently uninhabited. We were forced to break in and when we went and checked Harry's bedroom we found it empty, except..." Remus hesitated and shot a quick glance at Harry. "Except for the body of Harry's owl, Hedwig. She had been killed, her neck broken. There was no sign of Harry but I remembered him saying that he had previously been kept in the cupboard under the stairs so we headed down to check."

Remus was interrupted by Madam Bones. "He was kept in a cupboard under the stairs?" she asked incredulously. "When?" she demanded.

"Er, from when he was given into the Dursley's care until just before his eleventh birthday, I believe," Remus said. Harry hunched his shoulders; he really hadn't wanted anybody to know that.

"Why was this not reported before?" Madam Bones demanded.

"I...don't think anybody knew about it," Remus replied softly. "I only just found out myself a few days ago."

Madam Bones seemed to quiver with anger then took a deep breath and calmed herself. She looked up to where Harry and the others were sitting for a moment then turned back to Remus.

"Please continue, Mr Lupin."

Remus nodded. "We unlocked the cupboard and found Harry inside. He...he'd been badly beaten and his face was covered in blood. Professor Snape carried him into the living room and sent me to get Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey. She was able to give him initial treatment and then he was taken to Hogwarts."

"Why was he not taken to St Mungo's?" Madam Bones asked sternly.

"Professor Snape thought it would be unwise and we had to agree with his reasoning. He said that if we took Harry to St Mungo's everyone would know. It probably wouldn't take long for word to get to Voldemort..." There were gasps from around the room. "...and that if he knew that Harry was in such a vulnerable state he would not hesitate to launch an all or nothing strike against St Mungo's. We couldn't risk that. Poppy is a fully qualified mediwitch and Severus is a Potions Master. Harry got the best of care."

"When you spoke with Mr Potter, did he tell you who had injured him?" The other members of the Wizengamot leaned forward slightly at this question, their faces solemn.

"Yes," Remus said. "He said that it was his Uncle Vernon who had beaten him and killed his owl."

"Nonsense," Vernon blustered, both nervous and angry. "The little freak is lying!"

"Mr Dursley!" Madam Bones thundered. "Be silent! You will have your chance to speak later. If there is one more outburst from you, you will be silenced."

Vernon Dursley paled and his eyes widened with fear. Madam Bones turned back to Remus.

"And what did his Aunt and cousin do during this? Did they participate? Did they aid Mr Potter?" she asked.

"They didn't aid Mr Dursley, at least as far as Harry could remember, but they didn't aid him either."

"Thank you, Mr Lupin," Madam Bones said and gestured to the Auror who had brought Remus in. "You may go. Next witness: Severus Septimius Snape."

The Auror led Remus back through the door they had entered from and returned a few minutes later with Professor Snape. He was seated in the same seat as Remus. Madam Bones walked up to him.

"Your full name?" she asked.

"Severus Septimius Snape."

"Your current place of residence?"

"Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Your reason for residing at Hogwarts?"

"I am the current teacher of Potions."

Madam Bones nodded to herself. "Please tell us what happened on the night in question."

Snape drew himself up and proceed to give a version of events that matched Remus' and he too named Vernon Dursley as the one whom Harry had said had injured him. After he had finished, Madam Bones thanked him and called for the next witness. The Auror led out Poppy Pomfrey.

Madam Bones shuffled her parchments. "Your full name."

"Poppy Elizabeth Pomfrey."

"Your current residence?"

"Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Your reason for residing at Hogwarts?"

"I am the school's mediwitch," Poppy answered proudly.

"Mr Potter was given over to your care. Would you please inform the court of the extent of his injuries?"

Poppy's lips thinned. "Mr Potter had severe bruising to his face, torso and legs. He also had four broken ribs and his nose had been broken. His lip had been split in two places." She took a deep breath. "He also had a large amount of glass imbedded in his face and eyes. The facial injuries I could fix but his eyes were damaged beyond repair. We just didn't get to him in time. Mr Potter has been blinded."

A large silence descended on the courtroom. Harry's head was bowed and he was gripping his cane tightly with one hand. The other was gripping Ginny's hand tightly. She had both her hands wrapped around his. Ron had one hand on Harry's shoulder and the other was around Hermione's shoulders. Both of their faces were grim.

Madam Bones swallowed. "Did Mr Potter say who had done this to him?"

"He said that it was his uncle."

Madam Bones took a few deep breaths. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. You may go. The next witness is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

The Auror came over and led out Madam Pomfrey, returning with the Hogwarts Headmaster.

Madam Bones walked over with a grim expression on her face. "Your full name?"

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

"Your current place of residence?"

"Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Your reason for residing at Hogwarts?"

"I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Previous witnesses have stated that the wards alerted you to problems at Number 4 Privet Drive. What was the nature of the alert?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"It was very unclear," the Headmaster said calmly. "The wards indicated that Harry was alive but possibly injured. They did not however give any indication as to the cause. When I informed Remus of this, he insisted on going. I did not wish him to go alone and Severus was the only teacher available to go with him."

"You also heard Mr Potter's version of events?" The Headmaster nodded and Madam Bones continued. "And you have agreed to allow the Wizengamot to view this memory?"

Again the Headmaster nodded and Madam Bones gestured to the Auror who had brought in the witnesses. He left the room briefly and returned with a pensieve that had an odd, large, square-shaped attachment something like a flat screen on it.

"Oh," Hermione whispered to Harry and the others. "It's a viewing attachment. It allows the memory to be viewed by others."

The pensieve was placed in front of Dumbledore and he pulled out his wand. He delicately removed a memory and placed it into the bowl. Madam Bones then waved her wand at the pensieve and the

screen lit up. They saw a still picture of a bruised and bandaged Harry lying in a bed in the hospital wing. Ron, Hermione and the others gasped as they saw how bad Harry had looked and Ginny leaned her head on his shoulder. Madam Bones paled and waved her wand again. The image began moving and the court heard Harry's whispering voice describing the events of the night. By the end, everyone in the court was pale and Harry was shaking. Both Ginny and Ron had an arm wrapped around his shoulders and Hermione had reached over and placed a hand on his knee. Fred and George's faces had identical expressions of anger on their faces and Neville's expression was grim. Luna was staring at the Dursleys, her wide-eyed gaze cold and imperious. Mr Weasley was white-faced and shaking with rage and Mrs Weasley was red-faced as she glared at the Dursleys, tears running down her cheeks.

Madam Bones stepped over to the pensieve and shut it down with a wave of her wand. She waited while Professor Dumbledore returned the memory to his mind.

"Thank you, Professor. What is being done for Mr Potter now? How do you intend to continue his education?"

"I have asked for and been sent a trainer from the Guild of the Night." The Wizengamot members immediately started whispering amongst themselves in surprise until they were silenced by a glare from Madam Bones. She indicated for Dumbledore to continue. "He will now take over Harry's education. Harry will obviously remain at Hogwarts to be with his friends and so that his trainer may take advantage of the resources there. Also that is where Harry is the safest. I do not believe Harry's education will suffer in any way. His guardianship has been taken over by Mr and Mrs Weasley and Mr Lupin."

"Mr Lupin is a werewolf," Madam Bones objected and Harry's head came up and he frowned. "Are you sure that is wise?"

"It was Harry's wish that Remus Lupin be his guardian," Dumbledore said calmly. "I saw no reason under the circumstances to refuse that request. I know that there may be some objections to Mr Lupin which is why Mr and Mrs Weasley were named as joint guardians."

Madam Bones nodded with surprised interest. "Thank you. You may step down."

The Auror stepped forward and lifted the pensieve and he and the Headmaster left the room. Madam Bones turned to face Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Auror Shacklebolt, if you would administer the veritaserum to Mr Dursley, we will begin the questioning."

The tall, dark Auror nodded and pulled a small vial out of a pocket in his robes. He stepped forward.

"Mr Dursley, please open your mouth," he said in a deep, resounding voice. Vernon Dursley looked like he was about to object but a single look at the forbidding presence standing over him made him wilt and meekly open his mouth. Shacklebolt let three drops fall on Vernon's tongue and capped the vial. He watched Vernon until his face

became slack and his eyes drooped. He then stepped back and nodded to Madam Bones.

"Please state your full name."

"Vernon Michael Dursley," he responded with complete calm.

"What is your relationship to Harry Potter?"

"He's my nephew."

"How long has he been living with you?"

"Fifteen years."

"What room has been his bedroom in that time?"

"He lived in the cupboard under the stairs until he got that letter from that freak school he goes to. They knew too much so we moved him into Dudley's second bedroom."

Eyebrows were raised by the members of the Wizengamot at this response.

"Have you ever beaten your nephew?" Madam Bones asked.

"No, other than that Saturday night a few weeks ago," Vernon said calmly and the members of the Wizengamot looked at him with surprise.

"Have you ever shaken or yelled at him?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever mistreated him?"

"Yes."

"How have you mistreated him?"

"Not fed him properly, locked him in the cupboard and his room, made him do all of the work around the house, yelled at him, told him he was freak, worthless, a burden..."

"Enough," barked Madam Bones and Vernon Dursley fell silent.

"What happened in the week leading up to that Saturday night when you beat him?"

"I was having trouble at work. Someone had been embezzling money at the company and the evidence was pointing at me. I was being accused of the embezzlement as well as fraud and theft. On the Wednesday, there were four charges of bullying and sexual harassment lodged against me."

"Were these charges true?"

"No!" Vernon bellowed, his face starting to go purple. "I've never stolen money from Grunnings. I earn a decent wage and I don't need to steal to provide for my wife and son." It was remarked by all in the courtroom that his nephew was not considered in this.

"What about the other charges levelled at you?"

"Well," Vernon blustered and he began to sweat. Kingsley Shacklebolt started forwards; he was starting to fight the veritaserum, but stopped when Vernon settled back into the chair. "I may have been a little harsh on the people in question but they needed the encouragement, they were slackers. And what crime is there in admiring a woman. I admire my wife, don't I?"

"Did people at your work believe them?"

"Yes, which is completely preposterous! I have given many years of loyal service and have risen to a very responsible position. It's clear that they are jealous and determined to bring me down."

"Were they putting pressure on you? And how did that make you feel?"

"Of course they were putting pressure on me. They wanted me to resign, the idiots! But I refused; I was determined to fight these ridiculous charges. The whole thing made me angry, furious! I deserve better than that!"

"So you were stressed and angry, during the week. What about Saturday?"

"I had a phone call from the general manager of Grunnings asking me to resign quietly. That they would make it worthwhile and that they didn't need the adverse publicity right now. I was furious. How dare they treat me that way?" Vernon's face had gone a fairly interesting shade of puce and he was literally shaking with rage.

"What happened that evening?"

"After dinner that boy was smart enough to go back up to his room and Dudley went out to play with his friends. A couple of hours later, the police brought him back. They said he'd been beating some girl and that he would be charged the next day. I thought it was some kind of trumped up charge but they said it was true. I couldn't believe my own son; my flesh and blood would disgrace me that way. We've done our best to bring him up right. We've given him the very best of everything. He's never gone without. And this is how he repays us, by bringing disgrace on my good name! I was furious with him."

"You started yelling at him?"

"Yes," Vernon said self-righteously. "It's what the boy deserved."

"Then what happened?" Madam Bones said sternly.

"One of those damn owls flew in through the window. Into my kitchen. I've told that freak boy that there are to be NO owls in my house." Vernon Dursley began almost vibrating with rage again and Madam Bones nodded significantly at Kingsley Shacklebolt. The Auror stepped forward and drew another vial out of his pocket and forced Vernon to drink it.

"It's a calming potion, I think," Hermione whispered to the group up in the viewing area.

When Vernon had calmed down, Madam Bones continued questioning him.

"What did you do when the owl came into the kitchen?"

"I yelled for that boy to get down to the kitchen and get rid of it but the stupid bird flew out of the window again. Then I...I..." Vernon stuttered to a halt and frowned.

Madam Bones watched him for a moment. "What happened when Harry came downstairs, Mr Dursley?" she prompted.

Vernon frowned again. "I...he..." he stammered and then shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't remember."

Madam Bones frowned at him. "You don't remember?"

"No."

She frowned again and beckoned to Kingsley. They went over to the members of the Wizengamot and a low-pitched discussion ensued.

"How can he not remember?" Ron asked quietly but heatedly. "I thought the veritaserum was supposed to take care of that!"

"Veritaserum makes sure you tell the truth, Ron," Hermione said quietly. "But it can't make you tell the truth if you don't remember it." She thought for a moment. "I've read about this. I think he got himself into such a rage that he tipped himself over the edge a bit. I think he really doesn't remember what he did. I think that's why they ran, because when he came back to himself and he saw what he'd done he knew he was in big trouble; there'd be no explaining this one away to anyone."

"So what do they do now?" Neville asked anxiously.

"I think..." Hermione started and then waved everyone into silence when Madam Bones turned back to face the Dursleys.

"Auror Shacklebolt, if you would administer the veritaserum to Mrs Dursley so we can get to the bottom of this?"

Kingsley nodded and walked over to Petunia. She cringed in her chair but made no protest when he indicated for her to open her mouth. He let three drops fall onto her tongue and waited for it to take effect. When it had he turned back to Madam Bones and nodded.

"Please state your full name."

"Petunia Rose Dursley."

"Your husband is Vernon Michael Dursley?"

"Yes."

"What happened on the Saturday night in question when Harry came down into the kitchen?"

"Vernon started yelling at him, telling him he was freak and that he knew the rules about owls in the house and that he was nothing more than an ungrateful wretch who only knew how to make our lives a misery. Then he grabbed Harry by the scruff of the neck and pulled him out of the kitchen and they went upstairs."

"Do you know what happened there?"

"I didn't at the time, though I could hear first Vernon and then Harry yelling. I found out later that Vernon had killed the boy's owl."

"Then what happened?"

"I don't know. When Vernon was upstairs, I took Dudley and we left and went to a neighbour's house. I was frightened. I had never seen Vernon so angry and I was afraid he'd hurt my Diddy darling."

Madam Bones took a deep breath. "Leaving your nephew alone with him?"

"Well, I couldn't let him hurt my Dudley now, could I?" Petunia said as though it should have been obvious. This caused a small wave of muttering through the courtroom, which Madam Bones silenced with a glare.

"When did you return to the house?"

"About 2 hours later."

"At what happened then?"

"Well, Harry was nowhere to be seen. Vernon seemed much calmer." Petunia frowned and continued. "In fact he seemed almost frightened. He said that Harry had run away, threatening to go to...to you people. Well, we couldn't trust him not to lie to you and then we'd be in trouble, the ungrateful little wretch. Vernon said we'd have to hide until we could find away to let you lot know the real story of what happened. He said that America would be the best for now. So we packed hurriedly and left. I thought it would be best to wait for morning but Vernon insisted we leave immediately. He said you lot couldn't be trusted."

"Thank you, Mrs Dursley," Madam Bones said with dry irony and returned to her seat. She and the other Wizengamot members conferred with each other for a moment. Madam Bones stood.

"The Wizengamot will take a two hour recess to allow the Dursley's to recover from the veritaserum and for us to consider our verdict." The ten members of the Wizengamot rose and filed out of the door, their heads together, deep in discussion. Two more Aurors came in and led the Dursleys out through another door. Mr and Mrs Weasley collected the teens together and they too left the court. The Headmaster was waiting for them in the corridor.

"Come along everyone. I have arranged for a room to be set aside for all of us and for some lunch to be provided. It seemed better than wading through the masses," he said, his eyes twinkling.

He led them down the corridor and into a small conference room. Plates of sandwiches and jugs of pumpkin juice were sitting on the table and the hungry teens fell onto them. The hours had passed surprisingly quickly in the courtroom. Harry fumbled for a chair and sat down heavily. Ginny and Remus came over and sat on either side of him.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ginny asked quietly.

Harry shook his head in bewilderment. "He doesn't remember and they weren't there. How am I supposed to understand why he did it when he doesn't remember?" he said plaintively.

Ginny slid her hand into his and Remus placed a hand on his shoulder. "Actually Harry, the fact that he can't remember is the explanation." Harry looked at him with confusion on his face and Remus tightened his hand. "Rage...is an odd thing, Harry. Rage can focus your attention; it can give you strength when you thought you had none. Or it can turn you into a beast, an animal. I think it did that to your uncle. He doesn't remember because the rage took over and blanked out everything else. Normally it wouldn't have done that. Normally he would probably have just yelled at you, maybe locked you in your room; do what he'd done before. But remember he was under extreme stress from what was happening at work and the pressure they were putting him under. What he thought was undue and unwarranted pressure. It looks like that weakened his control enough that when the rage took over, it really took over. Your uncle is essentially a bully but one with a nasty temper. Bullies tend to be cowards though. That's why he's never beaten you before; he was too much a coward to tempt fate like that. To risk you telling someone at school and what that would mean for him. But that night, the stress and his rage overrode his cowardice"

The others had been listening to Remus' explanation.

"You're not excusing him, are you?" Ron asked incredulously.

Remus gave an odd laugh. "No, not at all, Ron," he said firmly. "It was a reason, not an excuse. But I know the feeling. I remember most of what happens when I'm a werewolf, not clearly but I remember. The only time I have absolutely no memories is when the werewolf gets enraged. It hasn't happened often but when it has all I remember is the rage, not what I did."

"So what'll happen to them?" Harry asked.

Remus sighed. "I don't know, Harry. We'll just have to wait."

Chapter 15

Two hours later they were all called back into the courtroom. Professor Dumbledore and the others who had acted as witnesses joined them in the viewing area. When everyone had settled and the Dursleys had been brought back into the room and been seated, Madam Bones rose.

"The Wizengamot has come to a preliminary conclusion, however, before we make a final decision we would like to speak with Mr Potter."

Harry froze and his friends bristled in alarm. Remus opened his mouth to protest but closed it when Professor Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder. The Headmaster rose and made his way down to the floor of the room where he immediately entered into a quiet discussion with Madam Bones and the other Wizengamot members. When he returned his face was grim.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I'm afraid you will have to speak," he said quietly. "Some of the members wish to be absolutely sure before they make any decisions. I have been able to insist that Remus accompany you and that, as your guardian, he may call a halt to the questioning at any time if he feels you are becoming unduly stressed. You will not be required to take veritaserum."

Harry gave a nod and stood shakily. Remus quickly came and stood by him. Harry grabbed his arm and was led down onto the floor of the courtroom. Remus led him to the chair, helped him sit and stood behind him with both hands on his shoulders.

Remus leaned down and whispered in his ear. "If at any time it gets too much for you, Harry, just let me know," he said anxiously.

Harry gave a weak smile in return and raised his head when he heard someone walk up to him. Madam Bones eyed him with sympathy and smiled reassuringly at Remus.

"Thank you, Harry," she said kindly. "I know this cannot be easy for you. I will be the only one to ask you questions; do not respond to anyone else. Just answer the questions clearly and honestly."

Harry swallowed and nodded.

"You have heard the testimony that has been given today. Was it accurate?" Madam Bones asked.

"Yes," Harry said quietly and the faces of a few of the Wizengamot members became grim.

"Has your uncle ever hit you before?"

"Um, well, he's done stuff like give me a clip around the ears before but he's never beaten me before."

"Has your aunt ever hit you?"

"Um, no, not really."

"Not really?" Madam Bones questioned. "What has she done?"

Harry hesitated. "Er, well, she threw a frying pan at me once because I broke some plates but she missed. I moved too fast. But otherwise it's never been anything more than what Uncle Vernon has done, you know, a clip around the ear."

"Has your cousin ever hit you?"

"Er, yes."

"Beaten you?"

"No," Harry said with a dismissive shrug. "Just a whack every now and then when we were little. He doesn't try anything now." This last sentence was said with a secretive little smile that the adults in the room found very amusing.

"Do you like your relatives?"

"No."

"Yet you did not hesitate to save your cousin's life last year when the Dementors attacked. Why?"

"Well, I was also saving my own life and, well, Dudley may be the world's biggest prat but that doesn't mean he deserves what the Dementors would do to him," Harry said with confusion at this line of questioning. "I'm not sure anyone does," he continued quietly.

Madam Bones smiled softly at him, pleased with such a mature answer. "Is it true that Mr Lupin was your choice as your guardian?"

"Yes."

"And Mr and Mrs Weasley?"

"Yes."

"Do you wish to return to the Dursley's home?"

"No!" Harry half-yelled with a shudder. Remus' grip on his shoulder tightened and Harry took in a deep breath. "No," he said quietly. "I don't want to go back."

Madam Bones was quiet for a moment as she considered the final question on her parchment. She had been unsure whether the young man should be asked this question but given his answer to the Dementor question she thought that maybe he could handle it.

"What do you want done to the Dursleys?" she asked solemnly.

Harry swallowed and was quiet for a couple of minutes. Finally he looked up at her with his blind eyes. "I don't care," he said honestly. "I didn't come here because I wanted to get some kind of revenge. I came here because I wanted to know why my uncle did what he did. As long as I don't have to see them ever again I don't care what happens to them."

"Even though you have been blinded?" Madam Bones asked curiously.

"Yeah, even though that happened," Harry replied. "Look, I hate being blind but how is doing something horrible to the Dursleys going to change anything. And anyway, I've got a great new teacher. It's not like I'm going to be helpless or anything." Harry's head came up and he sat proudly for a moment.

Madam Bones nodded, clearly impressed with the young man sitting in front of her. "Thank you, Harry. We have no further questions for you."

Harry stood and with Remus' help, returned to where the others were sitting. He collapsed back down and his friends quickly hugged or patted him on the back.

Dumbledore leaned forward and rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Well done, Harry. Well done indeed."

Madam Bones returned to her seat and the members of the Wizengamot conferred quietly again. After about ten minutes, she stood and cleared her throat.

"The Wizengamot has come to a decision." She turned and faced the Dursleys. "Vernon Michael Dursley, would you please stand."

Vernon pushed himself to his feet and stood trembling, completely devoid of his normal manner and staring intently at the floor. Madam Bones looked at him sternly.

"Mr Dursley, you have committed a terrible act upon your nephew," she said grimly. "You beat and maimed a defenceless boy who had been placed into your care after the tragic death of his parents. In fact from what we have heard you have betrayed that trust many times over with your neglect. Yet in spite of your behaviour, Mr Potter has

grown to be a fine, upstanding young man. A situation I have no doubts is in spite of your efforts. The Wizengamot has considered all that it has heard today and has come to a decision. While it is in the power of this court to try and sentence a muggle who has the guardianship of a witch or wizard, it does not lie within our power to enforce such a sentence on a muggle. Therefore, you will be handed over to the muggle authorities where you will be incarcerated in an appropriate prison for a term of not less than ten years and not greater than twenty years. How long you remain incarcerated beyond ten years will depend entirely upon you and whether you are able to change for the better." She turned to the Aurors. "Take him away."

Kingsley indicated to two tall, strong Aurors who quickly stepped forward and grabbed Vernon by the arms. As they began to lead him out of the courtroom, the verdict seemed to sink in and he began to struggle and yell. The Aurors did not hesitate and tightened their grip on him, dragging him swiftly out of the room. Petunia gasped and paled, gripping her son's hand tightly.

Madam Bones turned back to the remaining Dursleys. "Petunia Rose Dursley, would you please stand."

Petunia rose shakily to her feet. "Mrs Dursley, while you are not responsible for the injuries to your nephew, you too have been guilty of shameful neglect. The Wizengamot views this very seriously and asks you to consider whether, had the circumstances been reversed, how your sister would have treated your son." Petunia flushed with shame and bowed her head. She knew full well that Lily would have raised Dudley as her own had positions been reversed. Madam Bones eyed her with satisfaction and continued. "However, in spite of your neglect and abuse of Mr Potter, the Wizengamot has taken into consideration the fact that you have a son. While your son is in no way to blame for what has happened to Mr Potter, nevertheless his own behaviour has been cruel and unchecked by either you or your husband. In spite of all of this, you and your son are free to return to

your home." Madam Bones paused until she could make eye contact with Petunia. "However, both your treatment of your nephew and your son's behaviour towards the local children has been reported to the branch of Social Services that liaises closely with the Ministry of Magic. You and your son will be watched, Mrs Dursley, and you will have monthly meetings with Social Services for the period of time in which your husband is incarcerated. Check your son's behaviour, Mrs Dursley, and think carefully on your own. You will get no more chances."

Petunia nodded as silent tears ran down her cheeks. She knew that with Vernon now in prison, she would have to find work to support herself and her son and she had few qualifications. All of her prideful arrogance was gone. She still had enough pride left however to hold her head up and face what was coming and enough intelligence to know not to blame Harry for this. She looked up into the viewing gallery where her nephew was sitting, surrounded by his friends. For once she looked at him, not as a burden or an embarrassment, but as her nephew and more tears fell as she took in for perhaps the first time how much his eyes were like Lily's. And she remembered how much she had loved her sister before she had allowed her bitter jealousy to taint everything.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she said honestly and remorsefully.

Harry started in surprise and then looked towards her. Petunia winced as the sightless eyes veered over to her and then saw her nephew nod once in acknowledgement. She turned back to face the front of the court. Madam Bones however had turned her attention to Dudley.

"Dudley," she said sternly and Dudley shot to his feet, slowly inching his hands behind him to cover his bottom. "You have cruelly and maliciously tormented your cousin for many years. And yet when the two of you faced the Dementor attack last year, your cousin stood by you and saved both of your lives. You are no doubt aware now of what effect the Dementors can have on you. Had your cousin not taken the action that he did, it would have been much, much worse. The Dementor's Kiss leaves a person mindless. You and your mother would do well to remember that and think hard on it." Dudley swallowed and nodded.

Madam Bones nodded to Kingsley again and the tall Auror came forward and stood behind Petunia and Dudley Dursley.

"This hearing is closed," Madam Bones said with finality and Kingsley ushered the Dursleys from the room. The Wizengamot members rose and quickly disappeared out of the room, leaving Harry and the others alone.

"Alright, Harry?" Remus asked quietly.

Harry nodded and the muscles along his jaw tightened. "Can we go home now?" he asked quietly.

Remus drew him into a hug. "Of course," he said and turned to the Headmaster. "Albus?"

Dumbledore drew a thin piece of metal out of his pocket which he quickly extended. Hermione recognised it as a telescoping antenna from a radio. The Headmaster quietly muttered, "Portus."

Remus guided Harry's hand onto the antenna and the rest all joined him.

"Shall we go then?" the Headmaster said and the familiar tug took them all back to Hogwarts.

As soon as they got back to Hogwarts, Mrs Weasley insisted that Remus take Harry up to their rooms and let him rest. Harry didn't seem inclined to argue so Remus agreed. The other teens slowly headed outside and sat down next to the lake. They sat silently at first and then Ron spoke up.

"They should have got more," he said quietly and there were noises of agreement from most of the others. Hermione was one of those who said nothing. She was staring at the lake, her brow furrowed as she thought. Ron gave her a nudge.

"Don't you agree, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione grimaced. "I don't know, Ron. Part of me agrees with you. But the rest of me says that if Harry's happy with what happened then we ought to be happy as well."

"I still don't really understand part of it," Neville said with a frown. "I mean that whole bit about rage that Remus talked about when we had lunch. I don't understand."

"I do, well, kind of anyway," Hermione said with a shrug. "I read about it once but it was a long time ago and I didn't really understand it at the time. I think I understand a bit better now. Look, Harry's told us before that Mr Dursley could get pretty angry with him from time to time but he never really did anything. He yelled and he locked Harry up but nothing worse than that. But Mr Dursley was put under some pretty extreme stress at work. I mean, being investigated for theft, fraud and embezzlement and having those harassment charges levelled against you would be bad enough, particularly if you didn't do it."

Ron snorted. "You really think he was innocent?"

"Well, I think he was innocent of the embezzlement, theft and fraud charges," she said. "But maybe not the harassment charges. Those seem the most likely. That probably put him under a lot of stress. Muggle businesses take those kinds of charges pretty seriously. You can get sacked if they are found to be true. They were already pressuring him to resign because they didn't want the scandal of the publicity."

"So what are you getting at?" Ron asked.

"Well," Hermione said, trying to remember what she had read. "Stress can reduce your ability to control yourself. Mr Dursley was under great stress and then Dudley was brought home by the police and he was in big trouble. Then you have the arrival of Pig just to add to it and I think Mr Dursley just snapped. His rage was too great for him to control. Under any other circumstances I think he would have done nothing more than yell but the stress caused him to completely lose control. I also remember reading that someone who experiences incredible rage like that often doesn't remember what they did."

"Temporary insanity," Neville suggested.

"Well," Hermione temporised, "possibly. There's a lot of debate as to whether there is such a thing as temporary insanity. Certainly the muggle legal system can't really seem to make up its mind."

"So is ten years for what Harry's uncle did considered a light or a harsh penalty by muggle standards?" Ginny asked.

Hermione gave a mirthless laugh. "Well, I suppose that depends on who you ask. There are many people who would say that they should have locked him up and thrown away the key. But there are equally as many who would say that he shouldn't be locked away, that locking people up is counter-productive and that people who commit crimes should be counselled, not punished. But the muggle legal system doesn't have access to veritaserum which I think makes all the difference. After all, three drops of veritaserum and you have the truth of the matter. In the muggle legal system, you just have to hope that they are telling the truth."

"Huh," Neville said, "I think I prefer the wizarding system."

"So do I," replied Hermione and the group lapsed into silence.

Harry lay curled up on his bed, eyes closed. He wasn't actually asleep though, just thinking. He wasn't sure whether he was pleased or disappointed at the penalties that had been handed down by the Wizengamot. He was kind of pleased that Uncle Vernon was being jailed but he was a bit ambivalent about what had been done with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. He knew that they wouldn't have an easy life now. Uncle Vernon's job had been a lucrative one and Aunt Petunia didn't have a lot in the way of skills. She would likely have to take a fairly menial job and those weren't very well-paid.

Maybe Dudley will finally lose some weight, he thought with an amused snort. Still, Aunt Petunia had apologised which was more than could be said for Uncle Vernon or Dudley. Harry snorted again, his thoughts jumping from place to place. Dudley would have to go to the local comprehensive. Aunt Petunia wouldn't be able to afford Smeltings' fees now. Unless she swallowed her pride enough to ask Aunt Marge for help. Harry rolled over and sighed with frustration. He couldn't seem to think very well. He'd always done his best thinking when he was on his broom. Something about flying just made things seem right.

He was descending into a nice little bout of self-pity when a thought occurred to him. Why couldn't he go flying? After all, with Oversight he'd be able to see things like trees and other immovable objects. Harry sat up, his sightless eyes gleaming and a smile curving his lips. Well, the only way he'd find out if he was right was to try it and he could certainly use the distraction of trying. He grabbed his cane, got up and opened the cupboard. He groped around until he found his Firebolt and rested it on his shoulder. He carefully opened the door to the lounge room he shared with Remus. His guardian had said he was going to a meeting with Dumbledore so Harry was fairly sure that he wouldn't be stopped.

A quick and careful listen determined that Remus was indeed gone and Harry quickly slipped out of the suite and headed for the nearest exit. Once outside he headed for the quidditch pitch, figuring that that was the best place to work out if his idea was a good one or not. When his cane hit the first of the support beams for the stands, he stopped and instigated his Oversight. He yelped with joy as the stands leapt into glowing view in front of him and he walked through them until he was on the pitch itself. He put his cane down and mounted the Firebolt. He took off slowly and was immediately glad that he had. It was a little disconcerting and almost dizzying to view the world with Oversight at times.

Harry did four low and slow laps of the pitch before he felt comfortable enough to try a faster pace. As he sped up he immediately started to feel better and he began laughing. Suddenly feeling free for the first time in weeks, he made a sharp upward movement and began soaring into the sky at a rapid pace. He then turned and dove towards the ground, which was a wonderful greeny-brown colour to his Oversight. He pulled up perhaps a metre short of the ground and tore along the pitch towards the stands. He pulled up tight again and flew upwards, spiralling and carolling his delight.

He didn't know how long he had been flying, performing all sorts of aerobatics, when he suddenly heard a furious voice yelling out to him.

"MR POTTER! GET DOWN HERE RIGHT NOW!"

He looked down and saw the energy colours he knew were Professor Snape, which surprised him as he was sure he had detected fear and well as anger in that voice. He shrugged and obediently flew down towards the Potions Master, noticing the energy shapes he had previously identified as Remus, Professor Dumbledore, Mrs Weasley and his friends all running towards the quidditch pitch. They had obviously heard Professor Snape yell, Harry groaned to himself. He headed down and was quite pleased with himself when he made a perfect dismount in front of the Potions Master.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry said with a beatific smile, his face glowing with pleasure. This expression completely disarmed Professor Snape and before he could marshal himself, Remus and the others arrived.

Remus came thundering up to Harry and grabbed him by the shoulders, looking him up and down.

"Harry! Are you alright? You're not hurt are you?" Remus started babbling and Harry frowned. Before he could say anything however, Mrs Weasley and his friends had gathered around him, making frightened and worried noises. Only Professor Dumbledore did not join in the worried hen-pecking. He stood next to his Potions Master.

"He was flying, was he?" Dumbledore asked mildly and Snape nodded. "How interesting," the Headmaster said with a secretive smile and a glint in his eye. The two of them turned their attention back to Harry.

"I'M FINE!" Harry yelled angrily and those fussing around him fell into a startled silence. Harry sighed and his anger faded. He knew they were only concerned. "I was using Oversight. I could see what I was doing perfectly well and I was enjoying myself," he continued in an exasperated tone.

"Well done, Harry," came the dry, amused voice of Master Nhean. Everyone whipped around in surprise to look at the Night Master. Nobody had seen him arrive.

Harry smiled wryly. "You knew I'd be able to do this, didn't you, Master?"

"Yes," Nhean replied firmly, "but you had to discover it for yourself."

Harry grinned; a lot of what his Master did involved discovering things for yourself. It was a little frustrating but very satisfying at the same time. "So would I be able to play quidditch?" he asked eagerly.

Nhean cocked his head to one side. "I can't see why not. It would take some work on your part to get used to using Oversight in such a manner but I think you could do it." He stopped and smiled. "I think it would be very good practice."

Harry's entire face lit up and the Weasleys exclaimed. Ron started grinning like a maniac and thumping Harry on the back. Ginny gave an excited squeal and hugged him and the twins began dancing around, chanting "We've got our Seeker back!" at the top of their lungs. They then shot off towards the shed where the quidditch equipment was kept and came back carrying a box. They quickly opened it and Fred grabbed the snitch.

"Stand back, everyone," Fred yelled and Harry's friends obliged. "Hey Harry! Catch this!" He let the snitch go and everyone watched in fascination and delight as Harry's eyes latched right onto it. The snitch flashed upwards and disappeared and Harry leapt back onto his Firebolt and took off after it. The Weasleys, Hermione, Neville and Luna whooped and hollered as Harry dove after the snitch. All of the adults, except for Master Nhean, watched in astonishment.

The snitch swooped and jinked around but Harry followed the little purple shape unerringly and within minutes was sweeping down to where his friends were standing and cheering with the snitch held firmly in his hand.

Nhean watched this with high amusement and when Harry landed he walked up to him and placed one hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps it might not take as much work as I thought," he said with a laugh. "But I think that's enough for today. You're using your Oversight in a way you never have before and if you don't have a headache already, you will soon. Practice will improve that and I don't think I'll need to remind you to practice this."

Harry laughed, handed the snitch back to Fred and picked up his cane. He then disengaged his Oversight and realised that his Master was right. He did have the edges of a headache but he grinned anyway. He didn't think anything was going to stop him today. He had back the one thing he was good at in his own right; that he'd thought he lost forever.

His friends gathered around him and they headed back up to the castle with the adults following along behind, still shaking their heads with amazement and amusement. Halfway back, Harry heard someone calling his name.

"Arry," Hagrid yelled as he puffed up towards them. "There yer are! 'Ave I got somethin' fer you! 'Ere." Hagrid pulled a small fur pouch out of one of his many coat pockets and handed it to Harry.

Harry smiled at Hagrid. The half-giant hadn't been around that much this summer. He'd said something in an embarrassed tone about Madame Maxime so Harry hadn't pushed the matter. He opened the pouch and carefully felt around inside. He wasn't sure exactly what he was going to find inside and just hoping it wasn't something with teeth. His fingers encountered a small, smooth egg and he carefully pulled it out. His friends gathered around to have a look at the egg sitting in the palm of his hand and, when they arrived, so too did the adults.

"Hagrid?" Harry asked. "What exactly is this?"

"Tha's the surprise!" Hagrid said in a pleased tone. "The bloke I bought it from said it'll hatch in a few days. I thought you could do with a new friend since that great lump of an uncle killed yer owl."

Harry swallowed painfully at the thought of his beautiful Hedwig but remained intrigued by the egg in his hand. It somehow seemed appropriate that it was Hagrid giving him this; he had after all bought him Hedwig before his first year.

"Wow, thanks Hagrid," he said with feeling and Hagrid ducked his head in embarrassment. "Do I have to keep it warm?"

"Yeah," Hagrid said with a blush. "Tha's why I've got it in tha' bag. Keep it in there an' it'll be warm enough. I don' think you'll have any problems. Especially not with 'Ermione around."

Hermione blushed and Hagrid ruffled Harry's hair and bid him goodbye. Hermione turned to Harry and examined the egg closely.

"Come on, Harry! Let's go to the library. I'm sure we can find out what kind of egg this is and what's going to hatch out of it!" she said with excitement. Harry and his friends all laughed as Ron groaned.

"Can we wait until after dinner?" Harry asked mock-plaintively. "I'm hungry after all this excitement and I'm sure the library won't run away while we're eating."

"You never know," grumbled Ron good-naturedly. "It probably thought it was going to get a break over the holidays. I'm sure it's frightened of 'Mione."

Hermione took a good-natured swipe at Ron, who grabbed her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Harry put the egg back into the pouch and Ginny took the opportunity to mirror Hermione's position with him. He smiled down at her and led them back up to the castle.

Chapter 16

Three days later Harry was lying flat on his back on the mats in the Guild classroom, resting after running through yet another kata. He had twelve memorised so far and the last was fairly difficult, requiring a few fairly drastic changes in direction at various points. He was not looking forward to finding out what some of the remaining katas were like. If each one built on the previous then the last few were going to be murder. Master Nhean was letting him rest for the moment at least, while he supervised the others and Harry was taking full advantage of the opportunity.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped. "The pouch! The egg!"

Harry hauled himself to his feet and ran over to the table. When he put his hands on it, he found that the pouch containing the egg Hagrid had given him was twitching slightly and he quickly undid the top and drew it out. He held the twitching egg in his hand and his friends gathered around him one by one as they finished the kata they had been doing. The last to join them was Master Nhean and he arrived just as the first split appeared in the shell. It only took the creature inside a few minutes to break enough of the shell to start nosing its way out and very shortly a small three-headed snake was lying curled up in Harry's palm. He quickly removed the remains of the egg and admired the snake. Its energy colours were orange flecked with yellow which Harry recognised as indicating courage, pride and intelligence.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione breathed in surprise and delight. "It's a Runespoor. It's beautiful."

The little orange and black snake uncurled and raised its three heads to look at Harry. "Hello," the middle head hissed. "Who are you?"

Before Harry could answer, the other heads swung around to face the middle one. "Well, obviously it is not our parent. It does not look like us, so it must be a friend," the left head hissed. "Foolish!" the right head snapped. "It is ours and we are its." The right head swung back to look at Harry. "What is your name? And what is our name?"

Harry was a little surprised by his new pet but rallied himself to answer. "My name is Harry," he hissed, "and I think I will call you Orinda." He and his friends had discussed what he was going to name whatever hatched out of the egg in the last couple of days. Hermione had speculated that the egg was some kind of snake egg though she hadn't been able to identify exactly what kind of snake. She had said that its shape and texture was the key so she, Harry and Ron had decided instead to look up serpent-type names. Of all the names they had found Orinda was the one that occurred to him as he looked at his new friend. Orinda was a Teutonic word that meant fire serpent and considering the colour of the energies and the colour in real life of the Runespoor, he thought it was most appropriate.

The three heads of the little snake considered the name for a moment. "What does it mean?" asked the middle head. "At least you had the intelligence to realise we are one, not three. Though I trust it's a male name?" the right head hissed sourly.

Harry swallowed a grin. The right head was starting to sound alarmingly like Snape. "The name means fire serpent and, yes, it's a male name."

The three heads hissed approvingly and swung around to look at the others. "Who are they?" asked the left head. "His friends, obviously," the right head hissed sarcastically.

Harry smothered a grin. "Yes, they're my friends. Their names are Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Fred, George and Master Nhean." He pointed to each one in turn and the little snake's three tongues flickered out each time, catching each person's scent to attach to the name.

"The one called Ginny has your scent on her," the left head hissed. "Is she your mate?" the middle head asked with interest.

"Er well, yes, no, er, sort of," Harry replied a little awkwardly.

"Good," the three heads hissed approvingly and the middle head continued. "We like her scent."

"Well, that's good," said Harry with bemusement and the little snake began curling itself around his left wrist.

"We will stay here," the left head hissed as the snake finished curling up. "We think that we will be safe here and we need to rest now." The left and right head immediately settled down to sleep. The middle head looked up at Harry for a moment. "We like you, sightless one,

our Harry. We will stay with you." With that it settled down and slept as well, leaving Harry staring at his new friend in astonishment.

"What did it say?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Erm, well, he asked what all of our names were," Harry said, still slightly stunned, "and he also asked me what his name was."

"Which did you choose?" she asked.

"Orinda. I thought it was the right one, considering the colours. It means fire serpent," Harry explained. "He also said he liked me and would stay with me." Harry began to smile.

The others beamed at him and then Hermione shook her head and chuckled. "Hagrid still hasn't figured out what's dangerous and what's not. The fangs on the right head are supposed to be extremely venomous."

Harry laughed. "Well, that makes sense I suppose. The right head was rather caustic. In fact, it sounded a lot like Professor Snape." The others all laughed.

"Well, Harry, do you think your new friend would mind if you continued your exercises?" Master Nhean asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think so, Master. He's definitely asleep and I'm sure the movements of the katas won't wake him."

"Excellent! Come, I have a new kata to teach you. The rest of you, redo the one that was interrupted by this rather interesting event." Master Nhean clapped his hands together twice and the eight teens groaned and headed back to the mats.

Dinner that night rather quickly became an interesting affair. It started when Harry walked over to Hagrid and gave him a hug.

"Thanks for the Runespoor, Hagrid! He's great!" Harry exclaimed.

Hagrid blushed and ruffled Harry's hair. "Yer welcome, 'Arry. I thought ya'd like 'im."

"A Runespoor, Harry?" Remus asked with interest and Harry went and sat down next to him. He pulled his sleeve up to show the little orange and black snake wrapped, sleeping, around his wrist.

"How fascinating," the werewolf said, examining the little creature, making sure not to touch him.

Dumbledore smiled approvingly at Hagrid and Professor Snape leaned across the table to look at the little snake.

"What have you called him?" Remus asked.

"Orinda," Harry said proudly. "It means fire serpent. He likes it and he likes me. He also knew I was blind; he called me 'sightless one'. Actually he said that he was mine and I was his."

"Possessive little thing," Remus said with amusement and then moved back a bit as the little Runespoor woke up and raised its heads.

"Ssssss, more people," the left head hissed. The right head made a grumpy sounding noise and the three heads looked around the table. "We like him," the right head said smugly.

"Who?" Harry hissed back.

"The black one who smells of strange things," the right head elaborated and Harry grinned.

"I thought you might," he said dryly.

Orinda hissed contentedly and slithered down into Harry's hand. Harry lowered the little snake to the table and switched to Oversight so he could watch as it started investigating.

"What did it say?" asked Professor Dumbledore curiously.

"He likes Professor Snape," Harry said absently as he watched the little snake sniff the plates on the table.

The silence that greeted that statement caused him to raise his head. "What?" Harry asked.

"He likes Professor Snape?" Remus asked with quiet humour.

"Er, yes," Harry said blushing. "Well, he said he likes the black one who smells of strange things so I assumed he meant Professor Snape."

"Why?" Remus asked, swallowing a grin.

Harry frowned, unknowingly echoing the Potions Master's expression. "Er, well, Professor Snape wears black and he does smell of strange things. The smell of the potions ingredients and the potions

themselves seems to linger on him a bit." He frowned again and cocked his head, scenting the air in Professor Snape's direction. "It's not a bad smell, just an unusual one. And a distinctive one; kind of spicy but at the same time kind of fresh and, well I don't know, unusual."

Snape raised an eyebrow at Harry and then turned his attention to the Runespoor. He offered the little creature a sliver of meat. Orinda considered it for a moment and then the right head delicately took the morsel from the Potions Master.

"Hey!" Harry said with amusement. "Professor Snape's trying to subvert my snake!"

The Potions Master smirked at Harry and offered Orinda another sliver of meat. "It's not a snake, Mr Potter, it's a Runespoor. And I do not think you have anything to worry about. If a Runespoor chooses to stay with someone, they rarely change their minds." Again the right head took the morsel. Snape looked up at Harry. "You called it 'he'?"

"Erm, yes," Harry said surprised. "He asked if the name Orinda was a male name and seemed pleased that it was."

"Hmm," Snape mused, continuing to offer the Runespoor tidbits. "I wasn't aware that Runespoors exhibited specific genders. Well, if...Orinda is ever willing to give up one of its eggs, do let me know. They are quite valuable as potion ingredients."

Harry nodded and Orinda crawled back over the table to him. The Runespoor climbed back into his hand and wrapped itself around his wrist once more.

"We do like that man," the left head said in satisfaction. The middle head hissed in agreement and the right head looked at the other two. "Of course we do," it said smugly. Harry smiled at the snake and shook his head.

The teens spread themselves out around the table, with Ginny sitting next to Harry. She leaned into him and looked at Orinda. "Could I touch him?" she asked quietly and Mrs Weasley drew in a quick breath.

Harry smiled at Ginny. He loved looking at her with Oversight. Her energy colours were scarlet, indicating courage and loyalty, green indicating she had a strong healing presence and brown, indicating practicality and dependability. The first time he had seen her with oversight she had had flecks of black in her energy colours. It had taken him a while to work out they those black flecks indicated fear and uncertainty. He was pleased to see that during the time she had been here, the black flecks were slowly diminishing from her energy colours.

He looked down at his Runespoor. "My er, well, my...mate wants to know if she can touch you. You don't mind, do you?" he hissed.

All three heads came up and looked at him. They then turned and looked at Ginny. The middle head suddenly went very still, along with

the rest of the body. The remaining two heads also stilled and seemed to be waiting.

"Harry?" Ginny asked and Harry held up a hand.

"I'm not sure what happening," he said and the Headmaster and Professor Snape both leaned over to look.

"Hmm, the middle head on a Runespoor is the dreamer," Professor Dumbledore said. "It can have visions and I suspect that is what is happening now. Just be patient."

Harry watched his Runespoor for a moment longer and then disengaged his Oversight and turned his thoughts towards dinner. He had no idea how long the middle head was going to be dreaming and he was hungry. After a quick thought, he reinitiated his Oversight and scanned the table. His thought was correct, he could determine where everything was with Oversight and he began to realise why Master Nhean had said that most Warrior don't ever really turn it off. He concentrated a little more, trying to focus on the bowl in front of him, not realising that he had gained the attention of everyone else at the table. Only Master Nhean realised what he was doing and he watched his young charge intently. Harry stared at the bowl, frustrated that he couldn't tell the details of what precisely was in it. He could identify that it was some kind of stew but what kind he didn't know. The colours of food tended to be pretty much the same; lots of shades of green and brown. Not surprising as food was natural and came from the earth and 'healed' you in a unique way.

Harry was just about to give up when Master Nhean said quietly, "Try saying Misetsukeru saimoku."

Harry frowned. "Miset...damn! Misetsukera saimoku," he said in a rush and then swore as the nature of what he was seeing changed. His eyes widened as the energy fields he had been seeing shimmered and almost seemed to flow, expand and contract for a second. They then settled and Harry shut his eyes and gasped.

Master Nhean quickly stood and walked around the table until he was standing behind Harry. He placed his hands on Harry's shoulders. "Easy, Harry," he said soothingly. "Slowly open your eyes and don't panic. You will be getting a bit of new information and it will take some time to get used to it." Harry slowly obeyed him and Nhean kept speaking calmly to keep him centred. "I'd not have introduced this step so early but I could clearly see that you were starting to get frustrated. The basic Oversight spell shows you the energy fields but little else. This addition to the spell that you have used, and it only needs to be used once, gives you the details you have been lacking. Now I'm sure you're asking yourself why it only needs to be used once. Well, that's a very good question and I don't have an answer to it. About 300 years ago there was an attack on the Guild headquarters in Tokyo by a disgruntled former Guild Member. It was not successful but he did manage to do a fair bit of damage and unfortunately part of the damage was to the library."

Master Nhean chuckled and he began to feel Harry relax under his hands. "That was a mistake on his part. Librarians tend to be fairly mild-mannered until you threaten their books and then, well, watch out! Among the books that were lost were the ones detailing the theory behind the two Oversight spells. While the theory for the initial spell was well understood, the theory behind the second was a bit arcane and complicated. Everyone could remember the incantation and the effects of the spells, no-one at the time of the attack could

really explain the theory behind the spell. And so it was lost. But the spell still works as you can see."

By this stage Harry had calmed down considerably. Ginny took his hand in her own.

"What can you see, Harry?" she asked quietly as Remus and the others looked on anxiously.

"It's so strange," he said quietly. "I can still see the energy colours but now there's a bit more detail. It's not just shapes anymore." He turned to look at her and ran a wondering hand down her cheek. "You're not just a shape made of energy anymore. It's been overlaid with detail now." He blinked a bit and then said softly, "I can see your face."

Master Nhean smiled softly and secretively. "And now you know the greatest secret of the Guild, Harry; returning a version of sight to its members. Not everyone can cast the second Oversight spell. We don't know why. Maybe it's because they don't want to enough or maybe they don't believe it's possible but whatever the reason, less than a tenth of Night Warriors are able to do it. I had feeling you might be able to. You're used to seeing and you've been very frustrated without your sight. I rather thought you might have the motivation to make the spell work."

"So you can see again?" Hermione asked in amazement.

"Sort of. Not clearly but sort of," Harry said with a smile. "The energy fields are still prominent and that's mostly what I see." He grimaced. "It's kind of hard to explain. It's like there is a layer over the top now that shows the details. It doesn't overshadow or replace the energy fields. It's like...a...an echo or a ghostly layer but in colour or a..." He thought for a moment. "Well, you'll probably be the only one to understand this, Hermione. It's like the Heads-Up Display that you see in fighter jets in the movies. Ah! It's like a projection of what actually there overlaying the energy fields."

At the last sentence, faces cleared around the table and people started nodding in understanding. Harry looked around, marvelling in this new ability. It wasn't sight like he used to have, the image that he saw was 'ghostly' rather than clear and solid but to be able to see again, no matter how indistinct, was incredible. As he looked around he quickly noticed that this new 'sight' was not consistent. For people like his friends, Remus and the professor he knew well, he could actually see details. For the professors he didn't know as well, there wasn't much in the way of detail. There was an indication of a face and a feeling of expression but nothing more and when he looked at inanimate objects such as chairs there was hardly any detail at all.

He looked at the plates of the food on the table and was pleased to see that he could now tell what was in them. It wasn't the same as looking at people; it was something between that and looking at objects. He turned a bit more and looked at Professor Snape. He flinched back from the intense glare that the man was directing at him and then blinked when the glare disappeared and a self-satisfied smirk graced the Potion Master's face. He looked curiously at Snape and received a ghostly raised eyebrow in return. Remus, who had seen the exchange of expression, grinned; he had a fair idea of what had just happened. Harry thought for a moment and then shook his head and gave an exasperated grin.

"You know that'll only work if I have my Oversight active, sir?" he said wryly and Professor Snape smirked at him again. Harry's friend watched the two of them curiously for a moment but Harry only shook his head at them. "Don't worry about it," he said with amusement and continued looking around.

He'd just finished making a circuit of the occupants of the table and was surveying the plates on the table again when he heard a quiet hiss coming from his wrist. He looked down and saw Orinda's three heads looking up at him.

The middle head looked carefully at him. "Not so sightless now are you, our Harry. It is well, it is well. Much have I seen in my dreaming." The right head hissed sourly but the middle head ignored it. "We like her," the middle head announced and the left head looked at it and then at Harry. "Take your mate's hand, our Harry," the left head said.

Harry looked curiously at his friend but did as it asked. As soon as he took Ginny's left hand in his own left hand, the little Runespoor uncurled itself and slid down to their joined hands. It twined itself around them for a moment and then crawled up to Ginny's wrist where it curled up for a moment and then it made the return journey back to Harry's wrist.

"Our Ginny," the middle head hissed and then the Runespoor settled down and appeared to go to sleep again while Harry stared at it with astonishment.

Ginny had watched all of this in silence and had been startled and then delighted when the Runespoor had curled around her wrist. "What did it say?" she asked with a smile.

Harry gave himself a shake and looked at his girlfriend. He was distracted for a minute by actually being able to see her and then he answered. He told her what Orinda had said about seeing and dreaming. "Then when he curled up around my wrist again, he just said 'Our Ginny'," he said with a smile.

Ginny looked both startled and awed then her lips twitched into a grin. "I guess it likes me then," she said dryly. The others laughed and everyone settled back down for their dinner. Harry looked over the dishes and served himself with pleasure. He knew it was only a small thing and his friends hadn't minded serving him his meals but he liked having that small independence back. He was about halfway through his meal when his head began to ache and he reluctantly dropped the Oversight.

"How long will it take before I can use the Oversight all the time?" he asked his Master.

"You could do it now," Nhean replied calmly.

"But what about the headaches?" Harry objected.

Nhean cocked his head a little. "You've been using Oversight now for over a week. It's taking longer and longer for the headaches to start,

isn't it?" he asked and Harry nodded. "That's a good sign. You could just leave your Oversight active. You will get headaches but as you've had no problems other than that so far, you'll be fine. The headache will fade in a few hours; a day at the most."

His tone had become challenging at the end and Harry stared sightlessly at him for a moment. His Master didn't often use that tone with him and when he did it meant that this was something fairly significant. This was something his Master wanted him to do but didn't feel he should be pressured into doing. Harry gritted his teeth and initiated his Oversight again; wincing a little as his head throbbed.

By the end of dinner, his head felt like someone was taking a sledgehammer to it and his face had become quite pale. He rubbed his temples as Ginny rubbed his back soothingly and then looked up at Master Nhean.

"Can I use a headache potion or will that mess things up," he asked a little plaintively.

"I was wondering when you were going to ask," Nhean chuckled. "Of course you can use a headache potion."

Harry sighed and looked down the table to where Madam Pomfrey was sitting. She anticipated his question. "Come on, Mr Potter," she said with a kind smile. "Let's go and get you one." The two of them stood and headed out of the Great Hall.

They were halfway across the room when Harry suddenly cried out and grabbed at his scar. He screamed again and collapsed to the floor. Ginny was the first to react. She leapt out of her seat and flew across the room. When she got to Harry she dropped to her knees, grabbed him and pulled his head onto her lap. By this time, Madam Pomfrey had collected her self and knelt down next to her. She quickly examined Harry then got up and ran over to Professor Snape. They talked quietly for a minute and then the two of them ran out of the room.

Ginny saw none of this. Her attention was solely on Harry and she was quietly talking to him. "Come on, Harry. Concentrate," she was murmuring to him. "Block your mind. You can do it. Come on, Harry." She repeated this over and over as Harry moaned in pain. Remus and the rest of the teens gathered around and waited.

Professor Snape came swooping back into the Great Hall, potion bottles in hand and the teens quickly made room for him. He was about to hand the first bottle to Ginny when she held up her hand.

"That's it, Harry!" she said encouragingly. "You can do it!"

They could see that Harry's brow was furrowed and he was panting. Ginny stroked his forehead and then his hair. Suddenly Orinda's three heads appeared from under his collar. The little Runespoor had obviously crawled up his arm. The three heads stared at Harry and hissed encouragingly to him. The right head then swivelled around and seemed to almost glare at Professor Snape. It hissed sharply at him, its tongue flickering in and out. Snape raised an eyebrow and lifted one of the bottles he had brought with him. The Runespoor's right head hissed approvingly and Snape handed the bottle to Ginny.

"Get him to drink this," he ordered as he eyed the Runespoor with interest.

Ginny nodded. "Harry, drink this," she said. Harry shook his head, his eyes closed tight, and she sighed in exasperation. "It's one of Professor Snape's potions and Orinda has approved of it," she said firmly and Harry shuddered and opened his mouth and drank the potion. Gradually Harry stopped panting and his brow cleared. He lay still for a moment with his eyes closed.

"I think I've done it," he said with relief. "He's still raging but I've put some kind of wall between him and me. I can still tell what he's feeling and thinking but I can't actually feel it, if that makes any sense."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Well done, Mr Potter," he said, much to the surprise of the teens. They couldn't recall Professor Snape ever praising Harry before.

Harry gave a weak grin; he was just as aware of that as his friends. "He's not happy with me," he said with weary humour. "From what I can gather, my headache was being passed through the link and I think he was doing something important though I can't tell what. The headache distracted him and...well, something went wrong." Harry gave a breathless laugh. "I think that upset him a bit and he got angry at me." Harry frowned in concentration. "He's able to direct his anger at me towards the link and that's what makes my scar and head hurt. It's hard to keep him out like this though."

"It will get easier with time," Snape observed. "How did you do it?"

"You've been teaching me about how to stop someone getting into my mind in the first place," Harry said and winced as a particularly strong wave of anger hit him. He concentrated on the 'shield' he had constructed to keep it out. "I tried to treat the pain as a person trying to get into my mind. It was hard at first. It's not quite the same but once I got a tiny grip on it, it got a lot easier."

Snape nodded. "Do you think you could leave the shield you have created up permanently?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so at the moment. It's hard but I don't know whether that has something to do with the fact that he was already in there before I set it up. But I think I might be able to do it in the future." Harry breathed deeply for a moment and concentrated. "You know, I think I could turn this back on him," he said speculatively.

"No!" Snape half-yelled, echoed by Remus and the Headmaster. "No, Mr Potter," Snape continued. "Do not do that. He is far more skilled in Occlumency than you are."

Harry nodded and then just as suddenly as he collapsed, he sighed and sat up, opening his eyes. "He's stopped," he said with relief. That was when he noticed that Orinda had wrapped himself around his neck and was hissing quietly.

"What is it?" Harry hissed to his friend.

"Bad visions," the middle head hissed in distress. The right head snapped at the middle head. "Stop that!" it hissed irritably. "The black man knew what to do. We should not fuss. Our Harry was helped by our Ginny and the black man."

"Snape," Harry hissed. "The black man is called Snape and don't snap at each other. I don't like it."

The three heads twined around each other and then separated. "We won't," the left head promised. The right head hissed sullenly, "We won't." It then turned to the other two heads. "Snape knew how to help our Harry. There was no danger," it hissed sullenly.

"I'm alright," Harry reassured the little snake and Orinda curled up around his throat again. "I'm alright," he repeated in English to those around him. "Orinda was just a little upset."

Snape looked at both Harry and the Runespoor with an interested expression and then stood. "Do not be late tomorrow morning, Mr Potter. We have much work to do," he said and walked briskly out of the Great Hall.

Harry shook his head with amusement. He knew Snape didn't do 'Your Welcome's' very well but he didn't even get a chance to say thank you. He had no reason to doubt what Orinda had said about Snape helping him. He shook his head again and grabbed his cane

from where he had dropped it. He got to his feet with Ginny's help and drew her into a hug.

"Thanks, Gin, I could hear you talking and it gave me something to focus on besides the pain. You really helped," he said, dropping a kiss on the top of her head and then one on her lips when she looked up. Ginny blushed and snuck a look at her mother and sighed with relief at the pleased expression on her face.

"How are you feeling now, Harry?" Remus asked anxiously.

"Um, pretty good actually," he replied. "That potion that Professor Snape gave me was a pretty strong headache potion so my head doesn't hurt much anymore."

"Alright," said Remus with relief. "Why don't you and Ginny go down to the Hospital wing and get some more headache potions from Madam Pomfrey. I think that's what she went to do."

Harry nodded and, with an arm still around Ginny's shoulders, they left the Great Hall.

Chapter 17

The next morning Harry wandered down to the dungeons, his Oversight still active and a headache potion in his pocket. The tapping of his cane on the floor was the only noise as he walked down the corridor. When he got to the door of the potions classroom, he knocked and, at Professor Snape's acknowledgement, entered.

"Thank you for the potion last night," he said as he walked up to the front row of desks and sat down. "Orinda said you knew what to do and because of that there was no danger."

Snape eyed him wordlessly and then pulled a small vial full of a green liquid out of his robes. Orinda, who was once again wrapped around Harry's neck, raised his three heads and hissed menacingly.

"Poison," the left head hissed. "Harry, leave."

Snape raised an eyebrow at the Runespoor's reaction. He walked into his office and put the vial away then returned to the classroom. Orinda calmed and his heads settled back down against Harry's neck. The right head came back up for a moment.

"Clever Snape," it hissed. "Testing us, he was. But we knew." It settled down again.

Harry looked at the Potions Master curiously. "What was that all about?" he asked mildly.

"Orinda seemed to know what I was doing last night. And he also appeared to know what the potion I gave you was for. I was interested to see whether that was right," Snape said, deep in thought.

"Oh," Harry said and waited for Snape to finish thinking. He patted Orinda lightly while he was waiting and was rewarded by quiet, pleased hissing.

Finally Snape seemed to come to some kind of conclusion and focused his attention on Harry.

"Now, Mr Potter," he said firmly, "we shall see if you can form that shield again today. Legilimens!"

Harry was caught by surprise by Snape's actions, not realising that with his new version of Oversight he could be attacked this way again, and the Potions Master was inside his mind before he could do anything. He growled quietly and quickly threw up the shield wall again, forcing Snape out of his mind.

Snape's lip curled. "Not very impressive, Mr Potter. I was able to get in so very easily. Legilimens!"

This time Harry was ready and he hadn't dropped that shield wall. Snape was stopped before he could get in though he tested the shield for some time before relenting.

"Well, well," Snape said sarcastically. "So you can learn. Keep the shield up."

This time Snape tried to get in using the subtler method they had been practising and again the shield wall kept him out. This time he tested the wall for a long time and Harry started sweating with the effort of keeping the shield up. Again Snape relented but this time he stared searchingly at Harry for a moment.

"Pity you couldn't lower yourself to learn this last year, Potter," he sneered. "Your idiot godfather might just be alive."

Harry snarled and Snape broke through into his mind. Harry tried to put the shield wall up again but couldn't focus through his anger enough to manage it. He felt Snape withdraw and looked angrily at the Potions Master.

Snape was staring at him with irritation. "Pathetic, Mr Potter," he said snidely. "Do you really think that the Dark Lord will not throw everything he can think of in your face? Do you not think he will taunt you with the deaths of your parents, your godfather, Mr Diggory? You must control your emotions, Mr Potter, or they will be the death of you and possibly others."

Harry shut his eyes and started one of the breathing exercises that Master Nhean had taught him. When he had calmed down slightly, he opened his eyes again and swallowed.

"I was tired," he said defensively. "It was hard holding the shield up."

"That is no excuse," snapped Snape. "Do you really think that the Dark Lord will be nice to you? In case you had forgotten, Mr Potter, he wants you dead. And waiting until your opponent is tired before making your best attack is an old tactic. He does know that one."

Harry sighed as he realised the truth in all of that. "Yes, sir," he said with resignation and put the shield up again. He was just in time as Snape launched yet another attack on his mind. The shield wall wavered for a moment under the attack until Harry reinforced it. Sweat was pouring down his face as he struggled to hold the shield up. Finally Snape relented and withdrew and Harry slumped in his seat.

"Better, Mr Potter," Snape said. "I think that will be enough for the day. Practice keeping the shield up for as long as possible. With that practice, keeping the shield in place will become second nature." He turned and retreated into his office.

Harry sat still for a moment and then dragged himself to his feet. He walked out of the Potions classroom and decided to head back to his room. He looked up at the old clock in the room and, after a few minutes concentration to sort out that he could actually see where the hands of the clock were, he realised that he still an hour before he

was due in the Guild classroom. He decided that he wanted another shower since he had the time and headed for the bathroom.

When Harry wandered into the Guild classroom, he found his friends already waiting for him. They quickly gathered around, wanting to know how his morning had gone. Harry filled them in and then was forced to deflect the criticism of Snape.

"Stop it!" he ordered and his friends stared at him in surprise. "It was exactly the right thing to do. And he's right; Voldemort isn't going to be nice to me. I've got to be able to do this."

"Do you have the shield up now," Ginny asked, twining her fingers through his.

"Yeah," Harry said with a sigh. "But I'm going to have to let it go soon. It's really tiring holding it up."

"Well, keep working on it," said Hermione worriedly.

"Yes, Hermione," Harry said patiently and let the shield go down.

Master Nhean walked into the room and raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Well, its nice to see so much enthusiasm," he said cheerfully and the teens greeted him with a laugh. "Have you all warmed up?"

There was a lot of head shaking so Master Nhean gestured for them to begin. After they had warmed up, he set all but Harry to running through the katas they had learned then he turned back to his apprentice.

"Now Harry, I think it might be best if Orinda sat this one out."

Harry looked surprised but obediently unwrapped the Runespoor from his neck and settled him on the table. He was about to lean his cane against the table as well when Nhean stopped him.

"You're going to need that today, Harry," he said.

Harry turned and looked at him in surprise. He then nodded and returned to the mats, cane in hand.

"Good," Nhean said approvingly. "Now release the sword and draw it but keep the scabbard in your off hand."

Harry did as he had been asked.

"Now run through the first kata," Nhean ordered.

Harry did so and discovered that the kata that he had run through unarmed suddenly became a different prospect with a sword in his hand. It was beautifully deadly with the movements offering plenty of opportunities to slice up an opponent and the scabbard now acted as a limited type of shield. There were a few places where the kata was now a bit awkward so when he had finished he automatically started it again to try and work out what was happening in those areas.

Master Nhean kept a close eye on things. He had been a little hesitant about allowing the use of live steel with the other teenagers around but had eventually decided that Harry and the others had to learn about weapon safety eventually. And at least here at Hogwarts there were no problems getting things healed if a mistake was made.

Harry's second run through the first kata was much better and he decided that a third run through was probably a good idea to make things completely clear. The third run was smooth and he immediately moved into the second kata. He was finding this rather exhilarating. While doing the katas unarmed was good exercise and good for toning his muscles, he had struggled to really see them as anything more. Master Nhean had told him they could be used for unarmed combat but he hadn't seen it until today. Now that he had some small understanding of how they could be used with a weapon, he could see how they could also be used for unarmed combat.

After a careful look to reassure himself that Harry was a good distance away, Master Nhean turned to the other teens. They weren't doing a very good job of their katas. They were too distracted by

Harry. He clapped his hands and was pleased to see that Harry didn't even flinch. The teens however stared at him and then there was an almost collective blush as they realised what they had been doing...or rather what they had not been doing.

"Focus!" Nhean barked at them. "You will notice that Harry did not even twitch when I clapped my hands. This is because his focus is much better than yours is. You must maintain your focus! You will be vulnerable to every occurrence on a battlefield if you continue to allow your focus to wander. Now begin again and FOCUS!"

The teens jumped and began the kata they had been working on again, assiduously keeping their minds on what they were doing. As Master Nhean watched them, he noticed that they were achieving some success now. Hermione, Ginny and Neville were still the best of them. Those three were smoothly working through the movements of the kata and seemed to be able to maintain their concentration the best. Luna had made a distinct improvement. He wasn't overly surprised about that; he had thought that her only problem was her lack of concentration. Once she had corrected that, she began to rapidly catch up with the other girls and Neville. The twins still had a tendency to want to move at the same pace through the katas but he was starting to get through to them about working on their own. Ron was still the worst of the lot but even he had made significant improvement. As before he still had problems if he lost his focus and became self-conscious but he was gradually improving. When his focus was intent, he was smooth and showed the ability to become quite skilled.

Just as Master Nhean was about to turn his attention back to Harry, the door opened and Professors Dumbledore and Snape came into the room. Nhean nodded approvingly when they were careful to stay near the door and he walked over to them.

"Albus, Severus, is there a problem?" he asked quietly.

"We were wondering whether we might speak with Harry?" Professor Dumbledore said, equally quietly.

Nhean nodded and walked over to where Harry was working. He saw that the young man was now working through the third kata and doing it fairly well. He waited until Harry had finished.

"Harry?" he said softly and Harry looked up at him.

"Yes, Master?"

"Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape wish to speak with you."

Harry looked around in surprise and then nodded. He sheathed his sword, remembering to lock it in and walked over to where Dumbledore and Snape were standing.

"Harry," Professor Dumbledore said without preamble, "how long do you think you could hold that shield up?"

"Erm, well, I think I could hold it for about an hour if I had to," Harry said in surprise. "I know it's not long but it's tiring. Professor Snape said if I worked at it, I'd be able to hold it longer."

Dumbledore looked at Snape. "Will that be long enough?" he asked.

Snape frowned. "Yes, I'm sure it will. I do not know why the Dark Lord wishes me to attend him but I doubt it could be anything too serious. He wants those potions and I am the only one skilled enough within his Death Eaters to be able to brew them."

Dumbledore nodded seriously. "Harry, as you no doubt have gathered, Voldemort has summoned Professor Snape to a meeting this afternoon. We don't know why and frankly, I'm worried. It is out of character for him to do this. I wanted to warn you. Professor Snape will send a message with a house elf when he has to leave and I want you to put that shield up then."

Harry nodded and then looked at Professor Snape. His new version of Oversight showed a ghostly version of the Potions Master and Harry could just see that the man looked even paler than usual. In a flash of insight, he understood what Professor Dumbledore meant. Voldemort rarely called private meetings; there was a real risk that Professor Snape's role of a spy had been found out. Harry looked soberly at Snape.

"I'll wait for the house elf, sir," he said and, at the Headmaster's smile and nod, turned to go back to his exercises. He took two steps and then turned back. "Be careful, sir," he said to Snape and then

returned to his position, completely missing the startled look that crossed the Potions Masters face.

After lunch the teens returned to the Guild classroom. Harry walked over and deposited Orinda onto the table and then began running through the katas again with his sword without a word. He had told them all what was happening that afternoon before they had gone to lunch and had hardly spoken a word since. The others watched him with concerned looks on their faces but let him work things through on his own, knowing that if he needed their help or advice he would ask for it, unlike last year.

For his part, Harry wasn't entirely sure what he was more worried about. His ability to hold the shield if something went wrong or the fact that Snape's role might have been discovered. He tried to dismiss these thoughts from his mind with the katas. He had some success; running the katas with a sword took a fair amount of concentration. As such he was startled when a house elf suddenly appeared in the room.

"Mr Potter, sir," the little elf squeaked, "Professor Snape says to tell you it is time." The elf then disappeared.

Harry took a deep breath and sheathed his sword. Ginny brought Orinda over to him and he gave her a hug and settled himself cross-legged on the floor. Orinda curled up around his neck as he established the shield inside his mind and his friends, after a quick look at Master Nhean to gain permission, settled in around him.

Severus Snape walked to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and apparated to Malfoy Manor. When he arrived he found a house elf waiting for him. The little creature led him through the corridors to Lucius Malfoy's study and opened the door for him. Severus took a deep breath and entered, bowing low before the Dark Lord.

"Welcome, Severus," Voldemort said quietly. "Please sit."

Snape straightened and sat down opposite the Dark Lord. He waited as his master eyed him with interest.

"You were present at the Wizengamot five days ago, in a hearing that involved Harry Potter. I believe you were a witness on his behalf," Voldemort said quietly and menacingly. "Do tell me that there is a logical explanation for this, Severus? I would hate to think you were disloyal."

Severus shivered. "My Lord, when the wards surrounding Potter's house alerted that there was a problem, Dumbledore insisted that I accompany Lupin to the house to find out what had happened. He would not accept anything other than a positive answer." Severus slipped out of the chair and dropped to his knees, knowing that this performance would have to be extraordinarily convincing. "I would have brought the boy to you, My Lord, but Lupin did not leave me alone with him long enough to do anything."

There was silence as Voldemort considered this answer. "Continue," he said.

"As I was there when the boy was found, I was pressed into providing testimony at the hearing into the boy's muggle relatives." Snape remained bowed in his kneeling position after he finished.

"Look at me," Voldemort ordered and Snape raised his head. "Crucio." Severus collapsed on the floor as pain ripped through his body. He struggled not to scream as the Dark Lord continued to hold the curse on him. Finally the pain left and he lay still on the floor for a moment, gasping and shuddering. He pulled himself back to his knees and looked back at his master, trying to still the shaking. That was when the Dark Lord struck.

"Legilimens!" he hissed.

Snape flinched as the Dark Lord's mind invaded his own. He allowed it as always and concentrated on keeping all of his secrets hidden; only allowing his master to see what he wished him to see. When the Dark Lord withdrew and invited him to sit again, he knew he had been successful. He returned slowly to his seat and waited for the Dark Lord to continue.

"Very well, Severus," Voldemort hissed. "It seems you have been honest with me. I trust you will continue to be so." His voice developed a menacing note.

"Always, My Lord," Severus said with a small bow of his head.

"Good. You may go and do not forget that I require the potions you are brewing for me as soon as they are ready."

Severus rose and bowed low to the Dark Lord and left the room. Once in the corridor he was met by the same house elf and led back to parlour where he apparated back to Hogsmeade. He immediately stalked back to the school. The moment he passed through the gates into the grounds he paused and leaned against the pillars, shaking. He wasn't sure if he was shaking because of the after effects of the Cruciatus curse or because of the near miss he had just had.

When the shaking diminished, he pushed himself off the pillar and started walking back to the school. He knew he would have to speak with the Headmaster but right now all he wanted was to collapse in one of the chairs in his rooms and throw down a stiff drink. He was relieved to get through the Entrance Hall without running into anyone and quickly stalked down into the dungeons. Thus he was surprised and unhappy to see Harry Potter waiting for him outside the Potions classroom, cane in hand and Orinda around his neck.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" he snapped.

Harry stared at him, his face set and his eyes full of anger. "I wanted to speak with you, sir," he said icily.

Snape glared at the young man standing in front of him. "It will have to wait, Potter," he said acidly and stalked past him to his rooms.

Harry grabbed his arm as he tried to brush past. "It can't," he said through gritted teeth.

Snape glared at Harry and shook his hand off. "Take your hands off me, Potter. We have nothing to discuss that cannot wait." He brushed past the young man and headed to his rooms.

"This can't wait," Harry ground out. "This is about the way you've been lying to me."

Severus paused in the action of opening his door and turned to face Harry. "What are you talking about?" he snapped.

"I saw everything that happened!" Harry yelled suddenly. "I'm talking about the way you keep forcing me to try and block everything out with Occlumency but you don't even bother to do it yourself! You're a hypocrite! You just let him in!"

"Yes, I did," Snape snarled. "And I did that, Mr Potter, because the Dark Lord is far more skilled than I am at Legilimancy. I do not attempt to keep him out. I keep the information I do not wish him to have locked away and leave the information he wants, or the version of it I want him to see, in my mind. My mind, unlike yours, is highly

trained and I can do that without arousing his suspicions. If, and that is a big if, you are ever capable of training your mind in such a fashion, I will teach you how to do that. Until then you will continue with the training you are doing now. Now if you don't mind, Mr Potter, I spent a number of minutes subjected to the Cruciatus curse, in case you didn't notice, and I wish to deal with the after effects of that." With that Snape stalked into his room and slammed the door behind him.

He walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of single malt scotch whiskey and poured a large measure into a glass. He threw it back and poured another. This one he took to his usual chair and he slumped down into it. He shut his eyes and breathed out. He was just starting to relax when there was a knock on his door. He sighed, got up and walked over to open the door. When he did he found a very contrite looking Harry Potter.

"Sir?" he said quietly. "I...I'm sorry."

Snape glared at him and he swallowed and ducked his head.

"I...I'll just go then," he said softly and turned away.

Snape watched him, a muscle twitching in his cheek, as he started to walk back down the corridor. He sighed quietly and was tempted to let Potter just walk away.

"Mr Potter," he said wearily, "Your...apology is accepted. Next time you wish to ask me something, try asking like an adult next time and not like a child."

Harry had stopped and flinched when he started speaking and was hunched into himself by the time he finished.

"I...yes sir, I will, sir," Harry said softly and started down the corridor again.

Snape watched him go and drank from the glass in his hand. He went back inside and drained the glass. He put it down and grabbed a handful of floo powder. As he turned towards the fireplace to report to the Headmaster, he couldn't help but think that he hadn't handled that well.

Harry walked back into the suite, still preoccupied over what had just happened down in the dungeons. He didn't see Remus sitting on the couch, reading, until the werewolf spoke.

"Harry? Is everything alright?" Remus asked with concern. The young man looked like he was about to cry; something Remus hadn't seen since they had had their big talk.

Harry jumped and whipped around to stare towards Remus. "I, er..." he trailed off, not really sure what to say.

Remus patted the couch next to him. "Why don't you have a seat and tell me?"

Harry hesitated and then remembered his promise about telling Remus things. He walked around the couch and sat down, leaning against his guardian. Remus wrapped an arm around his shoulders, giving Harry a worried look.

"What happened?"

"I...had an argument with Professor Snape," Harry said in a small voice. "And it was all my fault. I didn't think before I opened my mouth...again."

Remus chuckled wryly. "That's a prerogative of being young, Harry. Sirius was an absolute master of not thinking before he spoke when he was your age." Harry smiled weakly. "What did you do?"

"Professor Snape was called to a meeting with Voldemort. I shielded my mind for it but with the change in the link between us I saw the whole thing," Harry said quietly.

"So what happened?"

"Voldemort asked him why he testified at the hearing." Harry snorted. "I guess the spells that stopped people talking weren't that good."

"Not necessarily," Remus shrugged, "I'm sure there were people who saw us all arrive and leave. It wouldn't have been that difficult to find out what happened there. That's probably why Voldemort asked Severus to attend the meeting. He knew Severus had testified but didn't know any details."

"Huh," Harry said, "I guess you're right. Well anyway, Professor Snape said he been forced to testify and then Voldemort cast the Cruciatus curse on him." Harry shuddered. "I'm glad the shield stops me from feeling that now. Then he used Legilimancy to read Snape's mind. Snape just let him in and I guess that made me mad. After all he keeps pushing me about keeping everyone out."

"Let me guess," Remus said kindly. "You made some assumptions and then confronted Severus with them?"

Harry hung his head. "Yeah."

"Oh Harry," Remus sighed. "I don't suppose it occurred to you to just ask him politely why he allows that to happen? And why right after he returned from the meeting? You know what he's like; it was probably the worst possible moment. Particularly after he'd had Cruciatus cast on him. I hope he didn't tear too many shreds off."

Harry gave a soft laugh. "No, not too many, I suppose." He sighed. "I just feel really stupid, that's all. I went and apologised and he said he accepted my apology but he wasn't too happy."

"Well, I'm glad you apologised," Remus said with a smile. "Did he offer any explanation?"

"Yeah, he did and it was a good one and that just made me feel even more stupid."

"Don't worry about it, Harry," Remus said as he gave Harry a one-armed hug. "We all make mistakes. If you're still feeling bad about it then you can always apologise again tomorrow morning. I doubt Severus will come to dinner nor do I think he will welcome visitors tonight. Though I daresay he won't welcome the apology tomorrow. You apologised immediately and were obviously sincere, as he accepted it. I suspect he will just want to move on."

Harry sighed and leaned his head on Remus' shoulder. "Thanks, Remus. I still feel stupid but I feel a bit better about it all now."

Remus chuckled. "Your welcome, Harry. That's what I'm here for after all." He looked up at the clock. "Come on, we'd better go downstairs. It nearly time for dinner and you know how Molly worries when you miss meals."

Harry laughed. "What time is it?"

Remus frowned. "You can't see the details of the clock?"

"Oh, I let the Oversight go on the way back," Harry said a little sheepishly. "I didn't really want to see anything, if that makes any sense."

"Yes it does actually," Remus laughed and then looked interested. "So can you normally see the clock? And how much can you actually see?"

Harry grinned at Remus' interest. One thing he'd learned very quickly about his guardian was that he loved learning new things. About as much as he loved teaching.

"Well, I can see detail if what I'm looking at has detail and, with people, if they are familiar. People I know have the most detail, things like the floor and walls don't have any. I just see the energy fields when I look at the floor. But even the details of people I know aren't that clear. It's kind of hard to explain but I see a ghostly image overlaying the energy fields."

"What about things like chairs and tables?"

"I see a chair or table shape but I couldn't tell you what the colour was or anything like that."

"So it's not really sight as such but more like added detail?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, pleased that Remus understood. "I think I actually get more information from the energy fields than I do from this new part of Oversight." He paused and smiled with delight. "But I'm really enjoying being able to see Ginny, no matter how indistinct it is."

Remus laughed merrily. "I'll bet you are. I must admit that when I saw you and Ginny lying on that couch the other night I nearly laughed. You two looked so much like James and Lily. I guess liking red-heads runs in the Potter family."

Harry laughed and looked towards Remus with surprised delight on his face. "We did?"

"Yes! In fact the thought that ran through my mind was I couldn't remember how many times I saw James and Lily sitting like that both in seventh year and afterwards."

Harry swallowed and tears welled up in his eyes. "You know that's one of the best memories anybody who knew my parents has ever shared with me?"

Remus pulled Harry into a hug. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should tell you more about your parents. I promise I will from now on."

Harry let out a single sob and Remus tightened his arms. When Harry pulled back, his face was red but his eyes were now dry. Remus shifted and put one arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Come on, let's go to dinner," he said as he steered Harry towards the door. "And maybe I'll tell you and Ginny a few more stories about James and Lily."

Harry laughed weakly and they headed downstairs.

Chapter 18

The remaining weeks before the start of the school year passed very quickly. Harry had apologised to Snape and, as Remus had suggested, his second apology had been dismissed. His Occlumency lessons had settled back into the routine that had been established prior to the argument. His lessons with Master Nhean also progressed well. He had learnt all twenty-one of the katas and was now performing them both with and without his sword. In the last few days, Master Nhean had started working with him, duelling with swords. It was pretty stylised at the moment as he learnt how the movements in the katas could be used in a combat situation but he was certainly making some progress.

His friends were also making progress. Fred and George had had to leave a few days ago. Lee Jordan had been running their business for them over the summer but they could only stay away for so long. They had wanted to be back for the return to school rush. His other friends however had made some serious steps. Ginny, Hermione and Neville had started working through the katas with swords that Professor Dumbledore had dug up for them and Master Nhean had promised that when they were ready they would start sparring with Harry. Luna and Ron were still probably a few weeks off starting work with their swords. Ron had made the biggest improvement. Master Nhean had been right; the katas had been excellent exercise for accustoming him to the way his body was now that he had grown.

Ron and Ginny, and Fred and George while they were around, had also been working pretty hard with Harry on his quidditch. He was now pretty confident on his broom and he actually found it easier to find the snitch than before. It was somehow easier to find the purple energy ball that was the snitch than trying to find the glint of gold. Ginny had been able to beat him once or twice at the start but in the last week, she hadn't been able to get near him or the snitch. Ron

was gleeful; with Harry back on the team and Ginny showing a lot of skill as a Chaser, he couldn't see how they could be beaten.

Also going well was Harry and Ginny's relationship. All of their friends as well as the adults went out of their way to allow them time to themselves. They weren't rushing anything though, Harry was honestly just enjoying having someone who loved him and Ginny didn't want to rush. She was determined that they should take their time and get to know each other. And that they shouldn't let Voldemort force them to do things they didn't want to right now. She said each time that they had all the time in the world and Harry was starting to believe her. He was having enough trouble getting used to kissing her whenever he wanted anyway. Ginny occasionally got very angry with the Dursleys and she had surprised Harry into helpless laughter several times with her knowledge of invective. The first time she had gone off on them Harry had been surprised. She had been furious that because of the way they had treated him, he was always so delighted to touch her and be touched in return. She wasn't angry with him, of course, and Harry didn't completely understand why she was so furious. She refused to explain and Harry had eventually dismissed it. He just concentrated on enjoying himself and making sure that Ginny was also enjoying it...and listening to her incredibly impressive vocabulary of swear words. Fred and George would be proud of her.

Snape had gone to one more meeting with Voldemort. Harry had again shielded himself and watched. The Potions Master had been delivering the veritaserum and Voldemort had been excessively pleased. The whole thing had made Harry shiver. Somehow the sight of Voldemort being so pleased had made him almost nauseous. At least Snape had avoided the Cruciatus curse this time. Unfortunately Voldemort had not expanded on what his plan was. They had just over a month before the last of the potions was ready and right now there little they could do to plan for it. They did at least have the knowledge that whatever happened Snape would be hip deep in it so

all they could do was make some general plans and hope for the best. The Order was watching Croaker and hopefully that would be enough.

Neither Snape nor the Headmaster had been able to figure out why the link now worked the way that it did. The shield certainly worked to keep Voldemort out of his mind, though he could have done without seeing things when the Dark Lord got especially worked up. He had been forced to witness two more Revels and had been physically sick after both. He hadn't been able to work out a way of not being drawn into seeing things from Voldemort's point of view as yet but Snape had said that he may have a few ideas but he wanted to do a little more research before they tried them.

Harry walked down the corridor that led to the dungeon. This was his last morning Occlumency lesson. Tomorrow evening all of the students were coming back and Professor Snape had said he would need the day to set things up for the first week. They would work out a schedule for his lessons once the year started. Harry was both excited and a little apprehensive about everyone coming back. He was a little disappointed that he wouldn't be doing lessons with them, though he was sure he wouldn't miss Potions with the Slytherins one bit. Master Nhean had said that they would start doing wandless magic once the school year started. Harry was glad of that. If he was going to be using his sword, he would need to know how to do wandless magic. With his sword in one hand and the scabbard in the other, there was no room for his wand.

He walked into the classroom and found Professor Snape leaning against his desk, waiting for him.

"Sit down, Mr Potter, we have something to discuss."

Harry swallowed down his surprise and sat down at the front desk. Orinda was again around his neck, he seemed to like that position and oddly enough he wasn't as obvious as you might think despite his prominent colouring. At first glance, he seemed to be some odd kind of necklace. Orinda's three heads looked up when Harry sat down and the left and middle heads quickly went back to sleep. The right head had taken quite a liking to Snape. Harry was amused by it; they did after all have very similar personalities. The right head hissed for a moment before settling down to sleep again and Harry stifled a laugh.

"Something amusing, Mr Potter?" Snape said with a raised eyebrow.

"Orinda likes it down here. He was asking why we don't come down more often," Harry said smiling.

Snape's lips twitched. "He is welcome to visit at any time."

"But not me?" Harry said with cheeky innocence.

Snape eyed the young man blandly. "If you can be as quiet as your friend, you might be." His face then became blank and Harry looked at him with surprise.

Snape drew in a breath. "There are two reasons why I need to speak with you, Mr Potter. Tomorrow the walking menaces that the

Headmaster likes to call students will be back. Among them will be Mr Malfoy and his cronies."

"Er, sir," Harry said carefully, inwardly amused at Snape's description of the students. "I'm sorry to interrupt but I think I know what you're going to say. You're going to have to go back to treating me like you always have. I'd already worked that out, sir."

Snape nodded and frowned. "Good. I'm pleased you realised that." He paused and scowled. "I wanted you to know that I...am...not pleased by this. I find that I...can tolerate working with you when you are acting like an adult."

Harry looked at the Potions Master in surprise. That had to be possibly the nicest thing Snape had ever said to him. "Er, thank you, sir but it's alright. I know why you have to do it and well, I probably won't be happy about what you say but I won't hate you for it. You have to do it, Malfoy and the others have to be able to report to their parents that you despise the Boy-Who-Lived."

Snape was startled at the bitter tone that crept into Harry's voice at the end but was pleased that he understood.

"Good," he said with satisfaction. "I also need to speak to you about your Occlumency lessons. Technically you have learnt enough that you no longer need to continue them with me. The Headmaster would be able to take over your education from here. However I would like you to continue the lessons with me. I believe that I may be able to come up with some way of stopping you from seeing what the Dark Lord sees but there is another reason." Harry was surprised when

Snape hesitated, looking almost nervous. "Do you recall when you collapsed in the Great Hall that you said you thought you could turn what you were experiencing back on the Dark Lord?"

Harry nodded. "You told me not to; you and Remus and Professor Dumbledore."

Snape nodded. "Yes. It is possible for you to do this. To reverse at least some of what the Dark Lord has been doing to you. It will not be easy nor will it be pleasant but if you wish to learn how to do that, I would be willing to teach you."

Harry's mouth dropped open in surprise and he quickly closed it and thought hard. The opportunity to give Voldemort some of the grief he had been subjected to was an idea that he really liked but from the unusually hesitant way Snape had mentioned it, it would not be easy or even something that he should do.

Harry looked seriously at the Potions Master. "Do you think I should learn how to do this?"

Snape leaned back against the desk and sighed. "If you have the stomach for it, Mr Potter, and the courage then yes, I do think it is something you should do. I do not exaggerate when I say it will be unpleasant. The Dark Lord's mind is undoubtedly a sewer. You will see things you will come to regret knowing about."

"Worse than the Revels?"

"Yes," Snape replied bluntly.

Harry lapsed into silence and thought again. He finally looked up at Snape. "I want to do it. I'll probably regret this decision more than once but we could find out so much information this way, couldn't we? And I could possibly be able to influence him, right?"

Snape sighed; some part of him had hoped that Harry might refuse this. The boy would see some truly horrific things. But another part was very proud of him. This was a very adult, very responsible act. This would enable them to find out far more about the Dark Lord than anything they had tried before.

"Yes, Mr Potter, both of your suggestions are possible," Snape said quietly. "Now, I have discussed this with Master Nhean. He put your Potions lessons in abeyance while you caught up with the reading he set you. Have you finished that?"

"Er, yes, I have," Harry stammered, a bit startled by the sudden change in direction.

"Excellent," Snape nodded. "Then you will take your Potions lessons with me. Nhean has given me instruction on how they should be done. You will be down here at eight p.m. sharp on Monday and Wednesday nights and Saturday mornings at ten a.m. sharp. We will do potions work for an hour on Mondays and Wednesday with the

second hour being devoted to Occlumency. Saturday mornings will be purely Potions work."

Harry sighed; looks like he wouldn't get out of those potions lessons after all though at least he wouldn't have to deal with the Slytherins. "Yes, sir."

"Now, to work. Legilimens!" Snape barked

Harry walked into the Guild classroom a couple of hours later to find his friends in deep discussion with Master Nhean. They seemed to be talking about when and how they would be continuing their lessons once the school year started. He wandered over and listened in for a minute before offering a suggestion.

"Look everyone," he said reasonably. "You know how bad the first week of school is. Every year it's been the same. We end up rushed off our feet because we've gotten out of the habit of going to classes. Why not take the first week off while you settle in again and then we can all meet on Saturday afternoon and plan the lessons so that they fit in with your ordinary classes and with Quidditch practice?"

He was greeted by a number of wry grins.

"Now, Harry," Hermione said dryly. "You weren't supposed to bring logic into this discussion."

The others laughed and agreed to Harry's suggestion.

"Well, now that we have worked that out," Master Nhean said. "I understand the six of you are going into Diagon Alley this afternoon to do your shopping." The teens nodded. "Well, then I think I will cancel what I was planning to do today. I don't think you'd be able to concentrate. But I would like you all to sit down. I think we need to discuss a few things before the school year starts."

Harry and the others looked delighted at having a day off and they all settled down on the mats. Master Nhean joined them, sitting cross-legged.

"Firstly, I have decided that your lessons will be cancelled for tomorrow as well. Although I know the rest of the students don't arrive until evening, I somehow doubt any of you will be able to concentrate so I will surrender to necessity," Nhean said with a smile. "Secondly, Harry, I have a list of text books that you will need to purchase. Some of them are the same as the school texts but there are a few extra ones for your Potions classes and for my lessons, mostly on strategy and tactics. Has Severus spoken to you about what we plan to do with your Potions lessons?"

Harry nodded. "Yes and I've agreed to continue my Occlumency lessons with him as well."

"Excellent!" Nhean said with approval. "I know the extended lessons will not be easy, Harry, but I am pleased you are attempting them. Now you will also be doing to other classes with some of the teachers here at Hogwarts. You will taking Advanced Transfiguration lessons with Minerva, Advanced Charms lessons with Filius and Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts with...er, the new professor." Nhean smothered a grin, as he knew that the teens did not know who the new teacher would be. "This is mostly because you will be learning the lessons at least partly using wandless magic. I could teach you just as easily but the teachers in question are experts in their fields and I saw no reason for them not to teach you and plenty of reasons for trying to keep your routine as normal as possible. We will start out by having you attend the normal sixth year classes in those subjects. That may not continue; we're going to play that part a little bit by ear. You will also have private lessons with those teachers."

Harry grinned; he was thrilled at the idea of attending classes with his friends. He would actually feel relatively normal. Then he frowned. "Master? Who is the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher?"

Nhean chuckled. "Well, that's a secret, isn't it? Suffice to say, you know who it is and I think you will like having them as a teacher. Ah, now don't ask any questions. I won't tell you. Why should you learn the answer before any of the other students."

The teens grumbled a bit about that but Nhean just chuckled and went on. "Now, all of you, listen to me." Nhean's voice became very serious. "The Headmaster intends to inform the students that I am here to further Harry's education but nothing more. However, I must ask the rest of you not to go into too much detail about what you learn in here. I have...bent a few rules in what I have been teaching you. Oh, don't worry, it's nothing that you or I will get into trouble for but nonetheless you have learnt a few things that normally stay privy to

the Guild. I know your friends will be curious but I ask that you...evade as many questions as possible."

Harry and the others all nodded solemnly and promised Master Nhean they would be discreet. Nhean was pleased with this and dismissed them. The teens all stood and piled out of the classroom in a noisy mob, excitedly discussing the upcoming trip to Diagon Alley. That caused Harry to stop. He had quick word with the others and walked back over to Master Nhean, who presented him with the almost forgotten list of books. Harry grinned, thanked his Master and then ran to catch up with his friends.

After lunch the six friends gathered in the Entrance Hall again, waiting for Remus and Mrs Weasley to join them. Mrs Weasley was coming back to Hogwarts especially for this trip. She had returned home about a week ago, worried that Arthur was not looking after himself well enough. Harry stood with one hand gripping his cane and the other arm firmly around Ginny's shoulders, listening to the excited chatter of his friends. Ron was talking a mile a minute about what he was going to get from the twin's shop while Hermione was also going a mile a minute about what books she wanted to get from Flourish and Blotts. It was particularly amusing because they were actually talking to each other. Harry wasn't sure they were actually listening to each other though. It had been amusing to watch the two of them of the last couple of weeks. They were sort of slowly edging towards a relationship. Ginny had described it as two dogs circling each other trying to decide if they liked each other. That description had caused Harry to collapse laughing. He wasn't sure that either Ron or Hermione would appreciate being compared to dogs. He was hoping they'd actually get on with it soon though or he might just be forced to lock them in a small room until they figured things out.

Ginny and Luna were discussing their upcoming OWLS and how hard they were likely to be. Hermione had been telling them how easy they were if you studied and Ron had been moaning about how difficult they were so the girls were a little torn between the two. Harry was having a quiet conversation with Neville as he half-listened to the others. He and Neville had taken the opportunity last week to have a long, private discussion about the prophecy and what had happened to their respective parents. As a result, their friendship has changed into something much better than it had been before and Harry was surprised at the depths he had found in his quiet friend. Neville was going to do some major studies in Herbology when the year started and was also planning on doing an extended study project in the subject. He was also planning on concentrating much of his studies on Defence Against the Dark Arts and Harry was encouraging him all the way.

Hermione was also planning on doing an extended study project, though she was choosing to do it in potions. Harry had told her and Ron about his confession to Snape. He had then been yelled at for the next hour until he managed to get convince them that Snape wasn't going to take points or give them detention, that if anything the man had seemed amused and a little impressed. And when he had told them about Snape's offer to Hermione of supervising an extended study project, they had been surprised into silence. Hermione had then spent the next half-hour almost babbling in delight, much to the amusement of Ron and himself. Despite that, Ron hadn't been overly happy about it all; he still didn't really trust the Potions Master but he hadn't wanted to spoil Hermione's joy. She had promptly spent the next three days researching what topic she'd like to do and had then marched down to the dungeons one afternoon to present Professor Snape with a proposal. When she had come up to dinner still deep in discussion with the Potions Master, Harry and Ron had assumed her proposal had been accepted and she told them later that they were right. Extended Study Projects could last for one year or two depending on the scope of the project, Hermione had rather thought hers would need the full two years. She had decided to

look into the current treatments for extended exposure to the Cruciatus curse and to try and find an improvement; either improving on the current potions used or coming up with an entirely new potion. Neville had nearly burst into tears when she had told them all her project topic and she admitted that what had happened to his parents, as well as the pain Harry had been subjected to before he learnt to shield, was what had given her the idea.

Harry's thoughts and conversation were interrupted by the arrival of Remus and Mrs Weasley. Remus was carrying an old woollen sock, which Harry assumed was the portkey that Professor Dumbledore had organised for them. He was proven correct when Remus called for them all to gather around and place a finger on the sock. Then the familiar fishhook-in-the-stomach feeling took over and they were all stumbling into each other in the small yard behind the Leaky Cauldron. Remus tucked the sock into his pocket and gestured for them all to listen.

"Professor Dumbledore has organised for the portkey to return us to Hogwarts in three hours so you should all have plenty of time to do all the shopping you need. I hope you all brought your letters and book lists." Five hands waved Hogwarts letters and Harry waved his booklist from Master Nhean. Remus chuckled. "Good. Now Harry and I need to go to Gringotts so I will leave the rest of you with Molly." He turned and tapped on the wall then led them into Diagon Alley.

Harry gasped and clutched at Remus' arm for a moment. Remus drew them out of the main traffic of the Alley into a small sheltered corner of one of the buildings.

"Everything alright, Harry?" he asked with concern.

"Yeah," Harry gasped. "It's just...there's so much magic here. I'd kind of gotten used to seeing all the magic in Hogwarts and I just wasn't prepared for it here."

Remus chuckled and waited for Harry to pull himself together. When he was ready, the two of them made their way down the street to Gringotts. As they were waiting in line, a thought occurred to Harry.

"Remus?" he said quietly. "What's happening with Grimmauld Place and the rest of Sirius' things now that he's...he's dead."

"Nothing at the moment," Remus said with a sigh and then he looked around to ensure that nobody could hear them. "We're having a slight problem convincing the Ministry that he's dead and that he was innocent. Believe me, Dumbledore's trying but there are a few people in the Ministry digging in their heels. The Order is still using Grimmauld Place as Headquarters but we've made provisions to move in a hurry if things go badly. Sirius' nearest blood relatives are Bellatrix Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy. If we can't get his will accepted, everything will go to them."

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes but let the subject drop. They slowly moved forward in the line and when they got to the front they were quickly ushered over to the entrance to the vaults. One quick trip later, Remus was throwing galleons, sickles and knuts in a bag for Harry. They then made their way back to the surface and, at Harry's suggestion, headed for Flourish and Blotts to buy his books. Throughout the next couple of hours, Harry kept getting strange looks. He knew that people recognised him but they were a little taken aback and confused by the lack of glasses and his cane. He was, not

surprisingly, heartily glad to finish his shopping and head back to the Leaky Cauldron. They had about half an hour to go and Remus suggested they wait in a private room. Harry agreed and the two of them settled in with a couple of butterbeers to wait for the others. The rest came bustling into the room with about ten minutes to spare, all loaded down with bags and boxes. Ron and Hermione were arguing loudly about how much study they actually needed to do this year and Ginny, Neville and Luna were watching them with amusement. Mrs Weasley was the last to come in and she just rolled her eyes at the arguing pair.

"They've been at it the whole time," she said in exasperation and she sat down with a thump next to Remus.

He and Harry laughed and Remus pulled out the sock-portkey. "Alright everyone!" he bellowed and when they all fell silent and stared at him, he gestured to the sock. "It's almost time. Everyone, grab your things and place a finger on the portkey."

Everyone shuffled around until they were all touching the portkey and waited. A minute later the portkey activated and they were all rushed back to Hogwarts.

They arrived back in the Entrance Hall where, due to the sheer amount of packages they were carrying, they all ended up on the floor. They picked themselves up and sorted their packages out then Mrs Weasley ordered them all to go and unpack. The teens groaned but slowly trailed off to Gryffindor Tower. Remus and Harry trudged up to their suite.

"Harry?" Remus asked as they made their way up the stairs. "Did you want to move back into Gryffindor Tower for the school year?"

"Erm, yes, I did. If you don't mind?" Harry said a little hesitantly. He had enjoyed living with Remus and didn't want him to be offended. "It's just that if I don't I won't get to see my friends that much this year."

Remus laughed, much to Harry's relief. "Of course I don't mind," he said. "I fully expected you to want to go back there. Though you know that you can come and see me and even stay here at any time?" Harry nodded and Remus ruffled his hair. "I just wanted to know whether you wanted to move up there tonight or leave it until tomorrow?"

Harry groaned. "Can we leave it till tomorrow? I don't think I can face the thought of packing and unpacking everything tonight."

Remus laughed and they continued on to the suite.

Dinner was once again a loud and excited affair. The teens had politely moved themselves down to the end of the table but still their noise was making more than one of the teachers wince. Snape was looking especially vindictive and he shot more than one glare down to their end of the table. Harry and his friends ignored the glares and wincing and concentrated on enjoying themselves. After tomorrow

they knew that they'd be stuck in a huge round of classes, practices and training and they were determined to enjoy their last night of freedom. They were also determinedly ignoring the threat of Voldemort, for this night at least.

Ron, Harry, Neville and Ginny were involved in a discussion that seemed to involve some complex quidditch moves when Harry suddenly gasped and clapped one hand to his forehead. This action brought all conversations at their end of the table to a halt and very rapidly produced the same reaction at the more adult end of the table. Harry shut his eyes and his breathing became heavier. Ginny placed her arm around his shoulders and whispered something into his ear. He shook his head and swallowed. He then shook his head again and looked blindly up the table.

"P...Professor Snape?" he whispered and then winced in pain.

There were startled reactions from everyone around the table and they became more pronounced when Snape stood and walked down to where Harry was sitting. He crouched down besides Harry.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" Snape asked.

Harry breathed heavily for a moment, his eyes tightly shut and his forehead creased in pain. "Is...is he...summoning you?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No, Mr Potter. Why?"

"He's...really upset and angry about something," Harry gasped. "I can't block it all out. He's really mad."

Snape frowned and concentrated on the young man sitting in front of him.

"NO!" Harry gasped suddenly. "Stay out!"

Snape suddenly wavered and nearly fell. He shook his head and glared half-heartedly at Harry. "I was merely trying to observe," he said impatiently.

"No!" Harry said. "I don't know if he can get into my head. If he can and you're there..."

Harry's voice trailed off into another pained gasp as Snape stared at him in surprise. He truly had not considered that aspect of the link. By this time Professor Dumbledore and Remus had gathered near Harry and were watching with concern. Orinda too had been roused from his slumber around Harry's neck and was hissing with some distress.

Suddenly Harry gasped and would have fallen backwards off his seat if Snape had not caught him. The Potions Master slowly lowered Harry to the floor and Remus pulled off his outer robe and bundled it up to be used as a pillow. Ginny quickly knelt beside Harry and was then joined by the rest of their friends. Orinda's hissing became

louder and he slowly unwound himself from Harry's neck, crawling down his shoulder and onto the floor towards Ginny. She lowered her hand to the little Runespoor and he crawled up and wrapped himself around her wrist. She gently ran her other hand through Harry's hair and looked up at the Headmaster, silently asking him what to do.

Dumbledore slowly knelt down next to Harry and patted Ginny on the shoulder. He then laid one hand on Harry's shoulder. The moment he did, Harry screamed and his back arched off the floor. As Dumbledore tore his hand away in shock, they all saw Harry's scar begin to bleed. Snape swore and pushed the Headmaster out of the way. He clamped his hands around Harry's head and closed his eyes. He screamed once, loudly, shockingly, and then fell silent. Ron jumped forward with a cry; one hand outstretched but was stopped by Hermione.

"Don't, Ron! I'm sure he knows what he's doing," she said worriedly. She wrapped her arms around Ron and he returned the gesture.

They could do nothing but join all of the others in watching the tableau before them helplessly. A collective sigh was released when Harry stopped screaming and collapsed back onto the floor. He and Snape remained in their positions though. After nearly twenty minutes, Snape finally removed his hands from Harry's head. He looked dully at those standing and kneeling around him and finally fixed his gaze on Hermione.

"Miss Granger," he said hoarsely, pulling a small silver key out of a pocket. "Go to my office. This key opens the potions cabinet within. On the bottom shelf of the cabinet you will find a small wooden chest. Bring that chest back here."

Hermione took the key from him with a nod and ran out of the Great Hall, brushing the tears from her eyes. Snape turned his attention back to the young man lying on the floor in front of him. He gave a start of surprise when Remus lay a hand on one black-clad shoulder.

"Severus? What's happening?" Remus asked.

Snape cleared his throat. "I...do not know. The Dark Lord was angry and then excited. Then he began performing some kind of magic. I did not recognise it." Snape shook his head. "I believe there was an overflow of magic that fed back through the link that Potter and the Dark Lord share. It overcame Potter's efforts to shield."

"You were able to help him," Remus said with certainty.

"Yes," Snape said and then coughed. "Albus, I think you should examine my memories of what happened later tonight. You may recognise what he was doing."

"Of course, my boy," Dumbledore said soothingly. "But I think it can wait until tomorrow. I daresay you will need the rest."

Snape scowled and then coughed again. Finally he waved a hand at the Headmaster in surrender. Hermione came running back into the Hall, cradling a small wooden chest in her arms. She came to a skidding halt next to the Potions Master and thrust the chest into his

waiting hands. He put it down and opened it with a whispered word. His hand ran lightly over the vials inside and he grabbed one containing a sickly-orange coloured potion. He prised Harry's jaw open and poured it into his mouth, running his fingers over the young man's throat to force him to swallow. After that one had gone down, he pulled out a light blue coloured potion and also poured that down Harry's throat. He sat back on his heels and watched for a moment and when Harry began shuddering, he pulled out a third vial, this one containing a bright red potion. He slipped an arm behind Harry's shoulders and pulled him slightly upright.

"Harry," he said, much to the surprise of the others in the room. It was the first time they had ever heard the Potions Master refer to Harry by his first name. "Drink this."

Harry moaned but obediently drank the potion when Snape tipped the vial into his mouth. Shortly afterwards his eyes slowly flickered open and he stared blankly. The others quickly recognised what Snape had already known; Harry had dropped his Oversight. Harry lay as he was for a moment and then his eyes closed again and he slumped against the Potions Master. Snape let out a sigh and slipped his other arm under Harry's legs and picked him up.

"Severus, let me levitate him," said Dumbledore in a kindly voice.

Snape shook his head. "No," he rasped. "You will not be able to use magic on him for twenty-four hours. It would make him violently ill."

The others reacted in surprise and Snape turned his tired gaze on Hermione again. "Miss Granger, please close the chest and take it

back to the cabinet in which you found it. Be sure to lock the cabinet again."

Hermione nodded and knelt down to deal with the chest. Snape turned towards the door and nodded to Remus. They left the Great Hall, closely followed by Hermione, who was once again carefully cradling the wooden chest. The others watched them go and Ron shook his head.

"Why can't Harry have a normal start to the year for once," he said mournfully.

Chapter 19

When Harry woke the next morning, the first thing he tried to do was initiate his Oversight. For the first time, he failed and with his failure he felt a wave of nausea wash over him and he groaned and fumbled for his cane. When he couldn't find it, he groaned again, swept the blankets away and stumbled out of bed. He really didn't want to throw up in his bedroom and in his distress he couldn't quite remember which way to go. Just as he was settling into fully-fledged panic, he felt a hand take his and another settle on his back. The hands guided him to the bathroom where his nausea finally got the better of him. After he had finished, the same cool hands gave him a towel and helped him wash his mouth out. They then guided him back to bed.

"I think it would be best if you remained here, at least for this morning," said Snape in an oddly gentle tone.

Harry gave a start of surprise and blushed. "Er, yes sir. I'm sorry, sir," he said, a bit embarrassed that Snape had seen him so vulnerable.

Snape grimaced at Harry's uncertain look. "There is nothing for you to apologise for, Mr Potter. You were not to know the effects of casting magic upon yourself. The potions I gave you last night will cause you to be very ill if magic is used upon you. The potions will wear off sometime this evening."

"Oh, okay," said Harry quietly. "Sir? What exactly happened last night?"

"How much do you remember?"

"Er, well, I remember the pain and I remember Vol...the Dark Lord being really angry about something. Then I think he succeeded at whatever he was doing and then all I remember is pain and screaming." Harry gulped and rubbed his forehead.

"Do you remember what the Dark Lord was doing?" Snape asked intently.

"I...no, I don't think so," Harry said uncertainly. "It was magic of some kind but I didn't recognise it." He hesitated. "Sir? I remember that you did something. I sort of remember you being in my mind even though I told you not to."

Snape sighed. "I know what you said, Mr Potter, and though I commend you on your logic, it soon became clear that whatever shielding you had had collapsed completely. You were in an extraordinary amount of pain. I entered your mind to attempt to shield you from whatever was happening."

Harry looked startled. "You can do that?"

"Yes. But only because of the Occlumency lessons we have been doing this summer. I am now fairly familiar with your mind. By entering it and shielding myself I was, by extension, able to shield you," Snape explained.

"Oh," Harry said, thinking that through. He then looked up towards where the Potions Master's voice was coming from. "Sir? Where is Remus? And...do you know where my cane is?"

"Remus is asleep. He was here throughout the night. When I took over this morning, he went back to his room," Snape said. "And I believe your friends have your cane. It is probably out in the living room."

Snape stood and walked out of the bedroom. He found all of Harry's friends sitting in the living room, talking quietly amongst themselves. They shot to their feet at his appearance.

"Professor Snape?" Ginny asked anxiously. "Is Harry alright?"

"Yes, Miss Weasley," Snape replied. "It is best if he remains in bed for at least the rest of the morning though."

"Sir?" Ron asked with a surprising amount of respect. "What happened last night?"

Snape eyed Ron long enough to make him shift uneasily. "I am not entirely certain, Mr Weasley. Certainly, the Dark Lord performed some kind of magic last night though what it was, I do not know."

"Can we see him?" Ginny asked.

"You may, Miss Weasley, and do bring his cane in with you," the Potions Master said neutrally.

Ginny grabbed Harry's cane from the table where she had placed it the previous night and followed Snape into Harry's room, ignoring the grumbles of the others. As she walked in Harry's head went back slightly as he scented the air and he smiled.

"Hi Ginny," he said happily and she sat down on the edge of the bed. She grabbed his hand and guided it to the cane as Snape sat down in the chair beside the bed and opened a large book.

"How are you feeling?" she asked gently.

Harry sighed with relief as his hands closed onto the cane and he leaned it against the bedside table, in easy reach. He then groped with one hand for one of Ginny's. She caught his seeking hand in hers and he pulled her into a hug and gave her a quick kiss.

"I'm okay," Harry said quietly, letting her go but keeping hold of her hand. "My throat's a bit sore but I can't feel him anymore."

"Good," Ginny said with relief. "Are you hungry?"

Harry's stomach roiled a bit at the thought of food and he shook his head. "I really couldn't face food at the moment," he said a little weakly. "I tried to start up my Oversight this morning and found out about the effects of those potions Professor Snape gave me at first hand." He rolled his eyes and Ginny chuckled affectionately.

"You always did like finding things out for yourself," she teased and Snape snorted in the background. The combination of these two things caused Harry to start laughing. When he finally stopped, the two of them lapsed into quiet conversation about the upcoming year.

Lunch interrupted their conversation as it came accompanied by Professor Dumbledore and Remus Lupin. They were both relieved to find Harry looking so well.

"Well then, Harry, you are looking much better. I trust you are also feeling that way?" Professor Dumbledore asked kindly.

"Yes sir," Harry replied as Remus settled the tray of sandwiches over his legs and sat down on the other side of the bed. Conversation was suspended while the five of them dug into the sandwiches, though Harry treated the food with some suspicion until his stomach indicated that it was going to accept them.

Shortly after they finished, Madam Pomfrey bustled into the room and shooed the rest of them out. She then asked a few pointed questions and checked Harry over.

"Well, I can't find anything wrong with you, Mr Potter, other than the residues of the potions Professor Snape gave you last night. I suppose you can get up now, as long as you don't try using any magic on yourself," she said sternly. "From the levels of the residues, you'll be right as rain by the time the Welcoming Feast begins."

With that she bustled back out of the room and Remus replaced her. He helped Harry get up and dressed and then drew him into a tight hug.

"I was so worried about you last night," he said as he let Harry go and handed him his cane.

Harry smiled at him and they walked out into the living room where Harry's friends leapt up and descended on him. Before they had a chance to ask any of the thousand questions they had, Professor Dumbledore clapped his hands together.

"Now, now, children," he said with amusement, "I have a few question of my own before you pester Harry." Everyone smiled and they settled Harry onto the couch. Dumbledore sat next to him and patted him on the knee. "How are you coping? You've gotten rather used to using your Oversight."

"Um, okay, I guess." He laughed rather deprecatingly. "It's surprising how easy it is to get used to not seeing anything again. But not so surprising to remember how much I hate this."

"I am sure," the Headmaster said soothingly. "Now what do you remember from last night?"

Harry repeated what he had told Snape and Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Professor Snape told me last night what he had done for you. If you are willing, I would like to get your memories of what Voldemort was doing, Harry. I hope to try and learn what he was up to."

"Erm, okay Professor," Harry said. "I assume that you mean in a pensieve. Well, you'll have to teach me what to do."

"Of course, Harry. I will not ask you to do this today but sometime in the next couple of days would be most helpful." The Headmaster rose to his feet. "Now I'm sure you wish to spend your last day of freedom with your friends and not your teachers so Professor Snape and I will let you get on with it."

Dumbledore and Snape both headed towards the door.

"Professor Snape?" Harry said before they could leave.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" Snape replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Th...thank you," Harry stammered, "for helping me last night."

"You are welcome," Snape said after a moment and left the room with the Headmaster.

Those remaining in the room stared after the Potions Master with surprise. Remus shook his head and turned to Harry.

"I know you were meant to move up to Gryffindor Tower today. Do you still wish to do that?" he asked with a mixed of good humour and a little wistfulness.

Harry blinked and then laughed. "Yes! I'd almost forgotten about that."

He and his friends jumped up and Ron and Neville headed into his room with Remus.

"You stay there, Harry," Ron yelled over his shoulder. "We'll get your things together."

Harry sat back down with a small laugh. "Just as well Ron said that," he said quietly to the girls. "I just realised how hard it would be to pack my things right now."

The girls laughed and Ron and Neville came back out into the living room, with Remus levitating Harry's trunk in front of him.

"Well, that was easy," Ron said cheerfully.

"Yes," Neville replied dryly. "Particularly when Remus used that charm. We didn't have to do anything."

Ron deflated a little as the others laughed and they left the room for Gryffindor Tower.

It was Hermione who reminded them that they had better change into their school robes and get down to the Great Hall for the Welcoming Feast. The boys grumbled a little but headed up to their dormitory. The Gryffindor girls did the same and Luna left the tower for the Ravenclaw dormitories, having moved her things back there that afternoon. Remus had left Harry's school robes out on his bed so it was a matter of a few minutes for the boys to get dressed. They trooped back down to the common room and sat down to wait for the girls.

"When did Snape say you'd be able to use your Oversight again?" Neville asked.

"Oh," Harry said, "he said sometime tonight but Madam Pomfrey said I should be able to use it before the Feast started. I might try it again." He laughed. "Just clear the way to the bathroom in case I react the way I did before."

Ron and Neville laughed and Harry concentrated. He sighed with relief when his vision was flooded with the energy fields and the ghostly images of his friends.

"It's back," he said with relief as Hermione and Ginny came into the room from the girls' dorms.

"What's back?" Hermione said with some alarm.

"My Oversight," Harry replied with a grin and the girls sighed with relief.

"Well, come on, everyone," said Ron excitedly. "Let's go down."

They trooped down the stairs and entered the Great Hall. The four house tables were back in place as was the teacher's table and all of

the teachers except for Hagrid and Professor McGonagall were already seated.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped, grabbing his arm. "Look! It's Remus!"

Harry looked up towards the teacher's table and saw the energy colours and ghostly image of Remus sitting where the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher normally sat, next to Professor Snape. He also saw Master Nhean sitting at that end of the table, next to Remus.

"He must be our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher," she said excitedly.

Harry and the others were startled.

"But...but how?" Neville asked with growing excitement. He had gotten his best marks ever in Defence Against the Dark Arts, except for his OWL, in third year. "I thought the Board of Governors wouldn't let him teach?"

"I guess Dumbledore must have convinced them," Harry said and was about to go up to the teacher's table when he heard the sound of the rest of the students arriving. "We'd better sit down," he warned as Luna walked into the Hall. "The rest of the students are coming."

The Gryffindors hustled over to their table and took their seats, Hermione fretting over not having done her duty as Prefect. Ron rolled his eyes at her as they sat on one side of Harry. Ginny sat on the other and Neville took the seat directly across from him. The rest of the students poured into the Hall, laughing and shouting at each other and took their seats at their respective House tables. There were many interested and speculative glances at Harry, which he and his friends did their best to ignore. They were quickly joined by Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan then Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil sat down next to the boys.

The other Gryffindors stared in shock at Harry. They had never seen him without his glasses and they were a bit startled about the cane that was leaning against the table next to him. Professor Dumbledore had done a masterful job of ensuring that no news of Harry's injury leaked out. Between the closed hearing and the trip to Diagon Alley only the day before, there had been almost no time for rumours to start. Before anybody at the table had time to ask any questions, Hagrid slipped into the Hall and took his seat and then Professor McGonagall came with the first years. She lined them up in front of the teacher's table and the Sorting Hat and stool were brought in. The rest of the students quietened down and the rip on the brim of the Sorting Hat opened and it began to sing.

I told you of the dangers

That were approaching last year.

But you did not listen

And you did not hear.

Once more I will tell you

And I hope you listen well.

For if you do not,

What will happen I cannot tell.

Many years ago,

When this school had just begun.

The Founders found a way

To sort those who would come.

For Gryffindor prized those

Whose courage did not fail.

And he did not care from where

Or from whom they did hale.

Hufflepuff favoured diligence

And those who would work true.

She welcomed those who would share

All that they knew

Elegant Ravenclaw liked wit

And those who were sharp of mind.

But she like all before her

Took those of every kind.

Noble Slytherin chose cunning

And those who were crafty and sly.

But this did not include those

Who were willing to lie.

The four Founders worked together

To educate them all

But now I find their noble vision

Is all but ready to fall.

Work together must all Houses

To achieve what must be done

To support the one true champion

The fight it must be won.

If you will not heed my message

If you will close you ears

Then undone will all the work be

That took so many years.

And having failed my task

I will be forced to leave

So listen to my words this year

And to each other cleave.

There was complete silence at the end of the Hat's song and the teachers exchanged worried looks. Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "When I call your name, please sit on the stool and I will place the Hat upon your head. Adamson, Aaron."

A small, blond boy scuttled nervously forward, picked up the Hat and sat down, putting it on. The Hat paused for a moment and then yelled, "Ravenclaw!"

As the rest of the sorting went on Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville leaned in towards each other.

"Well, that was certainly clear enough!" said Hermione.

"But how did the Hat know about the Prophecy," Neville said quietly. "That's surely what it meant by the 'one true champion' and 'the fight that must be won'."

"It lives in Dumbledore's office," Harry said. "So it probably heard the prophecy last year when Dumbledore showed it to me. I'm not sure I like being called that though."

"That was weird though, what the Hat said," Ginny mused. "About the four Houses. It seemed to imply that Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff have always taken everyone, including the muggleborn but that somehow Slytherin has gone downhill lately. 'But this did not include those who were willing to lie.' How strange was that?"

"What about what it said about leaving if we don't start cooperating?" Ron said indignantly. "It can't actually be serious about us cooperating with those Slytherins?"

"Ron!" Hermione admonished. "That's precisely the attitude that the Hat doesn't want!"

Ron settled back in his seat, grumbling and they all turned back to the Sorting. Many other students were whispering amongst themselves about the Hat's remarkable song as were many of the teachers. Harry looked up at the teacher's table and was greeted by a withering and distinctly unfriendly glare from Snape. He flinched and turned back to his housemates. Ron, who had also caught the glare, leaned over to him.

"What was that all about, mate?" he asked with concern. "I thought he was treating us like adults?"

Harry shook his head. "Shh, Ron! Nobody can know about that! Think about it. He can't treat me or any Gryffindor any better than he has been. Not with Malfoy and the others here. It'd be too suspicious. I knew he was going to have to go back to treating us like he always has."

Ron scowled and the two of them looked over at the Slytherin table to where Draco was sitting. The pale, blond Slytherin was sitting there alternately sneering at them and looking at Harry with confusion.

Ron laughed. "I'll bet dear old Dad told him about you being blind but now he's confused because you aren't really acting like it."

Harry laughed as well and waved cheekily at Draco. The pale Slytherin's expression settled into confusion then his face flushed and he glared venomously at the two of them before turning away and whispering to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry and Ron laughed again and turned back to the Sorting just in time to catch the last of the first years.

"Zane, Tobias."

"Gryffindor!"

They clapped and cheered along with the others. Then the entire Hall quietened down when Professor Dumbledore stood.

"Welcome all to another year at Hogwarts. Now, tuck in," he said then sat down as platters of food appeared on all of the tables and everyone did indeed tuck into the food. There was an odd silence at the section of the Gryffindor table where Harry was sitting and his housemates alternately ate their food and watched him. He tried to ignore it and talked quietly with his friends. When he had finished his dinner, Dean broke the silence.

"Harry, what's going on? Why aren't you wearing your glasses? Why weren't all of you on the train? And who's the new teacher sitting next to Professor Lupin?" Dean asked rapidly.

Harry gave a small laugh at the flurry of questions and every Gryffindor in earshot leaned in to listen. "I..." he hesitated as he realised that, apart from the original questioning after his rescue, he'd never actually had to explain what happened to anyone. He took a deep breath. "I...My uncle had some problems this summer and he...well, he hit me. And he...he blinded me."

Seamus and Dean burst out with furious swearing that was loud enough to draw the attention of Professor McGonagall.

"Mr Finnegan! Mr Thomas!" she yelled. "That sort of language is not tolerated at this school. Ten points each from Gryffindor and do not let me ever hear that sort of thing again or it will be detention for the both of you!"

Seamus and Dean ducked their heads as Harry and the others grinned at them. They understood what the two remaining sixth years

was feeling. The news was quickly being passed up and down the Gryffindor table and onto the other Houses. The din from so many students talking took a sudden upturn in volume and many students from the other Houses peered over to try and catch a glimpse of Harry. He hunched his shoulders and ducked his head; he knew that the news must be spreading like wildfire and he cringed a bit at the thought of all the stares he was going to gather now. His only consolation was that he was not likely to be able to see most of those stares.

"But Harry, you don't act like you're blind," Lavender said confused.

"That's because of my new teacher," Harry said proudly, glad that he could move on from what had happened. He still didn't like to talk about it. "His name's Master Nhean and he'll be training me this year."

"Will you still be doing any classes with us?" Parvati asked before Seamus broke in again, his face looking tragic. "What about Quidditch?" he said, horrified.

Harry laughed. "Its okay, Seamus. My ban was lifted and Professor McGonagall gave me back my broom and, well, I can still play."

"How?" Dean and Seamus chorused in disbelief.

"It's something called Oversight," Harry explained. "I can't really give too many details but it lets me see. Well, sort of. Anyway, it's certainly good enough to play Quidditch. Ask Ron and Ginny."

Seamus and Dean did just that and Ron and Ginny gave them an excited rundown of just how good Harry was. Harry was then forced to explain a little bit about his training and his Master. He told them briefly about the Guild of the Night and gave them an idea of what he was learning. He did not mention that the others were also being trained.

Dean and Seamus would have asked more questions but they were interrupted by the Headmaster standing again. When the Hall quietened down, he spoke.

"Once again, welcome back to Hogwarts. I have just a few start of term messages before I let you go to your beds. Firstly, I remind you all that the Forbidden Forest is indeed forbidden. I must ask you all to not venture in there for any reason." His face was very serious and Harry and Hermione shivered as they remembered what had happened in there with the centaurs. "Also Mr Filch has asked me to remind you that the list of banned items is on the door of his office. You would do well to examine it carefully. I understand that the entire inventory of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes is on the list." The students laughed and Ron's chest swelled with reflected pride. "I would also like you to welcome back Professor Remus Lupin who has agreed to return as our Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher." He was forced to pause as all the students but for the Slytherins burst out in cheering and clapping. Remus stood and gave a small bow, blushing. Harry and his friends were particularly loud and Remus gave them a small smile.

Dumbledore held up his hands for silence. "I would also like you to welcome Master Nhean who is here to aid in the training of Mr Potter." There were many intrigued looks at both Master Nhean and Harry and a polite smattering of applause. Dumbledore then eyed the students seriously over the tops of his glasses. "You all now know that Voldemort has returned." There were gasps and even a few small screams. "I am therefore pleased to see that you have all returned. There will be some small security measures put in place for this year. I am sure you will all respect them. Lastly, I am pleased to announce that all of the Educational Decrees issued last year have been revoked." He paused while the cheers rang out again and then held up his hands for silence again. "Now, off to bed!"

Hermione and Ron stood and started to gather the first years. Harry waved them off and waited with Neville and Ginny for the Hall to clear a little. When it had, he walked up to the teacher's table where Remus was still sitting, waiting for them with a smile.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Harry demanded.

Remus laughed. "It was supposed to be a surprise!"

"It sure was," Harry grumbled good-naturedly. "How did Dumbledore manage it?"

"Apparently he laid the guilt on fairly thick with the Governors," Remus chuckled. "I'm afraid he used your name and circumstances rather extensively, Harry."

Harry laughed and brushed that off. "I don't care," he said happily. "I'm just glad you're going to be here. Am I going to have to call you Professor Lupin again?"

"Well, in class you are but outside of class I think you can still call me Remus. Now you three had better get up to your dorm."

Harry grinned and they headed towards the doors. As they came out into the Entrance Hall, they were accosted by Draco, who was flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Well, well," the Slytherin sneered, "how the mighty have fallen. Nothing but a cripple now, aren't you, Potter?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Harry replied calmly as Neville and Ginny bristled.

Draco looked him up and down insultingly, lastly eyeing his cane. "What are you going to do, Potter? Feel your way around the Dark Lord?" He leered.

"No, actually I thought I might do something like this," Harry said pleasantly and then dropped to a crouch, swinging his cane at Draco's legs. The swift action caught Draco unprepared and his legs were swept out from under him. He fell backwards heavily and Crabbe and Goyle stepped forward with menacing looks on their faces. Harry didn't hesitate and moved smoothly from his crouch back

into a standing position. He quickly poked the two of them in the stomach with his cane, knocking them to the ground as well, and then returned the end of his cane to the floor. The whole thing had taken no more than ten seconds.

"Do you think that might work?" he asked Draco with acid sweetness and then the three Gryffindors quickly headed up to the Tower before a teacher could come and investigate. When they got to the corridor where the Fat Lady's portrait hung, they collapsed against the walls and burst out laughing.

"Oh, Harry, that was wonderful!" Ginny laughed and hugged her boyfriend.

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said with a grin. "I still think Neville taking on Crabbe and Goyle in first year was pretty good."

Neville blushed and then waved his hand. "No, no, you win, Harry. I didn't really get them and they ended up knocking me out. You got all three!"

The three of them burst out laughing again and headed for the Fat Lady.

Chapter 20

Breakfast the next morning was taken up with repeated descriptions of their run-in with Draco the previous night. Everyone on the Gryffindor table seemed to want to hear about it and the story quickly spread to the other Houses and Harry found himself being congratulated by as many Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws as Gryffindors.

Hermione was torn between amusement and disapproval and Ron was bemoaning his prefect status that had caused him to miss the moment. Professor Snape was glaring at Harry every time any of them looked towards the head table, which told them that the teacher's had heard about what happened. This was confirmed when they saw the glint in Remus' eye and the hastily suppressed twinkle in Professor McGonagall's eye when she handed them their timetables.

Ron looked at his and his face brightened. "Hey, I've only got double Transfiguration this morning and double Charms this afternoon." Then his face fell. "Bloody hell, they're all doubles. All my subjects."

"Of course they are," Hermione said primly as she looked over her timetable. "We're doing our NEWTs, Ron."

"Not this year," he moaned and then looked over Hermione's shoulder at her timetable. "Blimey, Mione. How many subjects are you doing? When are you planning on studying?" He then patted her sympathetically on the shoulder. "Wow, double Potions first thing today. What a welcome back."

Hermione shot him an exasperated look. "I'm only taking two new subjects this year. I decided to take Magical Healing and Laws & Legislation. I think they'll be interesting and useful."

Ron rolled his eyes. Harry chuckled and handed his timetable to Hermione. "Can you tell me what I'm doing?"

She looked at him strangely. "I thought your Oversight enabled you to see?"

"It shows me energy shapes and a little extra detail on top of that," he said patiently, "but I can't read using it, Hermione. It's not that good. And I left your present in the dorm."

"Oh," she said in understanding and looked over his timetable. "You've got double Transfiguration just before lunch. You've got a spare period just after lunch and then double Charms."

"Wow, Harry," Ron said, looking over Hermione's shoulder again. "Look at all those spare periods you've got! Brilliant!"

"They're not spare periods," Harry said with a laugh. "Any time I'm not in classes, I've got training with Master Nhean."

"And yours aren't spare periods either, Ron," Hermione said firmly. "Those are the times when you are supposed to be studying and doing your homework."

Ron decided not to argue and settled into a round of grumbling under his breath. Hermione handed Harry's timetable back to him and stood.

"Well, I've got to go. I don't want to be late to Professor Snape's class," she said and slung her bag over her shoulder. Harry stood and joined her.

"That probably means I should get going to." He paused and looked at Ron. He leaned down and spoke quietly. "You know, if you don't want to actually study, you could probably come with me and do some training. I doubt Master Nhean would mind."

Ron's face lit up and he stood. "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea!"

They walked out into the Entrance Hall where the two boys waved goodbye to Hermione and headed in the direction of the Guild classroom. Hermione watched them a little wistfully for a moment and then headed down to the dungeons.

Ron and Harry walked into the Guild classroom and began warming up.

"Are you sure Master Nhean is going to be okay with this?" Ron asked anxiously.

"I can't see why not," Harry said with a shrug as he moved Orinda to the table. "As long as he doesn't think you're letting your training interfere with your school work, I'm sure he'll be happy to let you continue whenever you have spare time."

Ron nodded and continued warming up alongside Harry. They had just finished when the door to the classroom opened and Master Nhean walked in. He smiled at Harry and his smile widened as he looked at Ron.

"Ron, welcome," he said warmly. "I take it you don't have any classes this morning?"

"Er, I have Transfiguration a bit later with Harry but nothing now. Harry suggested I do some training. Is that alright?" Ron asked nervously.

"Of course," Nhean replied cheerfully. "Anytime you don't have classes you are welcome to continue your training. I just don't want you falling behind because of this."

Ron's face lit up. "I won't, I promise!"

"Excellent. Now since you have both warmed up; Ron, start running through the katas you have already learnt; Harry, get your sword out and run through the first two katas to get into the swing of things."

The two boys hurried to obey and soon they were concentrating hard on their respective tasks. When Harry finished the first two katas, Master Nhean moved over to speak to him.

"Okay, Harry, I want you to start using your magic in conjunction with the sword work. Do you remember the pattern you followed when you were using magic with the katas before?" Harry nodded. "Good. I want you to use the same pattern. Now I know that normally wandless magic requires the movement of a hand and you will do the same here. Use the hand that is holding the scabbard. It doesn't need to be an open-handed gesture; nearly any kind will work. And don't forget to use the Lumos spell."

Harry nodded and began the first kata. He stuttered a little when he got to the first time he had to cast the Lumos spell and was unable to manage it. He determinedly continued on and at the second mark, he was able to produce a very dim light that seemed to emerge from his middle knuckle. Again he stuttered, this time with surprise. The third attempt went a little easier and he was able to produce a better quality of light. He managed to finish the kata without any further major stumbles and immediately repeated it. This time he managed to achieve a little more success and when he finished he sheathed his sword and grounded it. Master Nhean took this for the request that it was and walked over.

"Yes, Harry?"

"I'm finding it reasonably easy with the Lumos spell. It won't be that easy with other spells, will it?" Harry asked bluntly.

"Very good, Harry," Nhean said. "No, it won't always be that easy. You are lucky in that you seem to take to the idea of wandless magic quite easily. But the same principles apply to wandless magic as to magic with a wand. If it is difficult to cast with a wand, it will be difficult to cast without one."

"Do I always need to use the hand gestures?"

"Yes and no," Nhean mused. "With some spells, it will always be yes because they must be specifically directed at their target or if they are quite delicate spells. With others it will be no. It largely depends on how much power you have and how much mental discipline you exercise. The more you have of both, the less you will have to use gestures. However, you may have noticed that the katas incorporate movements that allow for gestures; that are gestures, in fact."

"Can I still use my wand?" Harry asked curiously.

"Of course! In fact you might want to in your classes, though the more you practice wandless magic, the better you will be." Nhean's face became grim. "I am encouraging you to use wandless magic for two

equally important reasons, Harry. The first is obvious; use of your sword with magic requires it. The second is the Priori Incantatem that occurred with Voldemort's wand. Being able to use wandless magic will, of course, negate that."

Harry stood and thought for a moment then a very odd expression crossed his face. "Can I use both at the same time? Both my wand and wandless magic, I mean."

Nhean's eyes widened and he looked at Harry with pride. "Yes," he said emphatically.

This caused Ron, who had been half-listening to what was said, to stumble and fall onto the mats. He, along with Harry and Nhean, had grasped the implications almost immediately.

"Blimey, mate!" he said with amazement as he picked himself up. "That's a huge advantage to have!"

Harry was still considering this idea himself then something else occurred to him. "Could Voldemort also do this?"

Nhean stopped and thought for a moment. "It's possible," he said, still thinking. "Hmmm, tell me, did he perform any magic that you saw before he regained his body?"

Harry thought back. "No," he said slowly. "Not that I can remember. It was Professor Quirrell who cast the spells in first year and Wormtail in that vision before fourth year. No, I don't think he cast any spells himself until he got his body and his wand back at the end of the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry's face filled with determination and triumph. Now he finally had an edge, however small, over Voldemort. He stepped back from Master Nhean and drew his sword again, launching into the second kata with fervour. Ron watched him for a moment and then turned back to his own work.

The rest of the day flew by and Harry was more than glad to sit down to dinner. He filled in Hermione, Neville and Ginny about what had happened during training that morning and was pleased when they reacted with almost savage delight. Ginny was a little subdued but Harry put that down to a long first day as a fifth year.

"Shall we go and practice some Quidditch?" Ron said indistinctly as he shovelled mashed potatoes into his mouth.

Harry was just about to agree when he remembered his new potions lessons. "I can't," he said with a grimace. "I've got my first Potions and Occlumency lesson with Snape tonight. Eight o'clock sharp, he said and I'd better not be late."

"Where are you having them?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "Down in the potions classroom, I expect. Why?"

Hermione looked at him as though he was a little slow. "Harry, isn't it going to look odd if you are constantly going into the Potions classroom when you aren't officially studying Potions this year. I mean your Occlumency lessons last year were covered as Remedial Potions lessons."

Harry stared at her for a moment. "You're right. I didn't think about that." He bit his lip as he thought for a moment. "I guess I'd better do something that'll make Snape give me detention or something. I'll do something to Draco; that always works. Thanks, Hermione, I'm not sure even he remembered about that."

Hermione rolled her eyes but had to admit that the ploy would probably work. "Just don't do anything permanent," she chided and Harry grinned at her.

"Trust me," he said and got up as though to leave the Hall.

Predictably, Draco took the bait. The Boy-Who-Lived leaving without his friends was a situation he couldn't resist. Harry looked up towards the head table casually and when he got to Professor Snape he raised an eyebrow, mischief twinkling in his eyes. Snape narrowed his eyes and looked over towards the Slytherin table. Seeing Draco, Crabbe and Goyle rise and scuttle out of the Hall, he scowled and

casually left the table, heading out the door behind him. Harry grinned to himself and sauntered towards the door, wanting to give Snape time to get himself into position. When he got out into the Entrance Hall, Draco and his cronies were waiting and he was sure that he had caught a glimpse of Snape's energy colours lurking in the corridor that led towards the dungeons.

Draco wore a very nasty expression on his face as he approached. Harry came to a stop and examined Draco's energy colours. He had one of the most complex combinations that Harry had seen up to this point. His dominant colours were Burgundy and Blood Red-Brown. The particular feel of those two colours told Harry that Draco's Burgundy aspects were elegance, wealth and power; none of which were that surprising. His Blood Red-Brown aspects were greed, hypocrisy, treason and betrayal and again Harry didn't see anything odd in that. He did wonder precisely how many people Draco was betraying though. He could also see that these two colours were flecked through with Yellow and Black. The Yellow seemed to indicate the aspects of intelligence and wit while the Black showed the aspects of hatred, evil, uncertainty and fear. There was also the expected purple aura of a wizard. All in all, Harry thought the colours were a very clear indication of where Draco was going and he vowed to speak with the Headmaster. Draco did not appear to be redeemable and Harry felt it was only a matter of time before he accepted the Dark Mark. The Headmaster would have to be warned.

"Wandering around without your friends, Potter?" Draco sneered. "Didn't anyone tell you that could be...dangerous?"

"For who? Me...or you?" Harry said mildly.

Draco's eyes narrowed. His father had told him that Potter had been blinded and Professor Snape had confirmed it but there were very few signs that it was true. His father had also told him to leave Potter alone; that the Dark Lord had plans for his enemy and that if those plans were disrupted he would be very unhappy. But, he thought with malicious glee, his father had said nothing about tormenting Potter.

"Or maybe you shouldn't be leaving your girlfriend alone," Draco said in a lavicious tone and was rewarded by Potter's expression darkening.

"You leave Ginny out of this," Harry snarled, trying to keep his anger under control.

"Why?" Draco laughed offensively. "After all, she's already had one...encounter...with the Dark Lord. Who knows what she got out of that? And what she might want in the future?"

The innuendo in those words infuriated Harry but some part of his mind remembered Snape's words about controlling his emotions to keep Voldemort out of his mind. As such the actions that followed were carried out with a measure of control and thought.

Harry snarled wordlessly at Draco and pulled out his wand. He pointed it at Draco's face. "Stay away from her!" he growled.

Draco took one step back so that he was now standing between Crabbe and Goyle and just sneered at Harry. The sneer was a work

of art, encapsulating a myriad of insulting comments without a word being said. Harry decided he'd had enough of this and it wouldn't be unusual for him to react now. He directed his wand right in between Draco's eyes and opened his mouth.

"What precisely is going on here?" Snape said acidly.

Harry didn't take his eyes off Draco. "I was just trying to decide what hex to use on Draco, sir."

"I see," Snape said unpleasantly. "My office, Potter, and twenty points from Gryffindor for threatening another student. Mr Malfoy, I'm sure you have better things to be doing with your time?"

Snape shot a cold, significant glare at Draco, who paled and nodded uncertainly. He gestured to his cronies and they disappeared down the corridor that led to the Slytherin common room. Harry sneered at the departing Slytherins and stomped down to the Potions classroom. When he got there he slouched into Snape's office, appearing to be sullen and angry. Snape followed him in a minute later and slammed the door shut.

"What were you doing out there, Mr Potter?" he demanded.

"Trying to make you give me detention," Harry said as he relaxed and dropped the sullen and angry appearance. "I didn't know how else to make it seem logical for me to be wandering around down here. I don't officially take Potions anymore so I can't be doing Remedial

Potions lessons." He smiled cheekily. "Detention, however, is much more believable."

Snape stared at him with irritation for a moment and then snorted with amusement. "Detention would not surprise anyone." He frowned. "What is wrong?"

Harry paused; he hadn't realised he was that easy to read. He sighed and decided to ask. "Has Draco taken the Dark Mark yet?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Not that I am aware of, though I believe it will be soon. Why?"

Harry sighed again. "His energy colours...are pretty clear. I...think he's fully committed to the Dark Lord. There was betrayal, greed, hypocrisy, hatred and...evil, among other things. I was going to go and see the Headmaster and warn him that Draco is not to be trusted but you probably should know as well."

Snape's eyes closed and he shuddered. "Mr Malfoy must make his own choices," he said quietly.

"You're probably right," Harry said and then continued in a contemptuous tone. "That assumes he's making his own choices. When has Draco ever not done something that his Daddy told him to do?"

Snape grimaced at this accurate assessment. "Unlike you?"

Harry stared soberly at the Potions Master. "Yes, unlike me. I never knew my father. All I have are the memories of others to judge him by. All I can do is hope that I am making my father proud. But I'll never know the truth of that."

Snape stared Harry for a long moment before giving his head a small shake and deciding to change the subject. "You did not need to go to such effort, Mr Potter. Professor McGonagall was to give you a message after dinner telling you to go to the Headmaster's office. He has arranged for us to floo to a room he has created for our use. He too was certain that you should not be wandering down in the dungeons. However since you have chosen to do things this way, we may as well go to his office now." Snape raised an eyebrow. "I trust you will behave accordingly."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Great," he grumbled. "Now it's going to look like I got myself into big trouble on my first day."

Snape's lips twitched with amusement. "You did, Mr Potter. You threatened another student."

"I didn't do anything to him," Harry said with exasperation and then shook his head. "Okay, sir, let's get this over with."

Snape smirked at him again and drew himself up into his most forbidding manner. Harry slouched and pulled an extremely sullen, angry and affronted expression and they left the office. Snape strode along the halls, glaring at anyone who crossed their path, and occasionally shooting irritated glances at Harry, who was stomping along sulkily beside him. When they got to the gargoyle, Snape snapped out the password, "Flossing Stringmints" and they went upstairs. The Headmaster bid them to enter when Snape knocked on the door and he watched the two of them with amusement as they came in, still very much in character.

"Well," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "you two must have created quite an impression on your way here."

Harry dropped his sulky attitude and grinned. Snape relaxed a fraction.

"An appropriate punishment, Headmaster," he said dryly, "considering Mr Potter's actions in the Entrance Hall."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, I suppose it was. I think we will say that Harry is serving detention with me." His lips twitched. "That will give me a good excuse to let Harry know what is happening and answer any questions he has. Now, the two of you are early but the room is ready. I take it that Professor Snape has informed you about what is to happen with your lessons?" Harry nodded. "Good, you may floo from here; just say 'Harry's Potions Classroom' and you'll be right."

Snape snorted. Harry chose to ignore him and grabbed a handful of the floo powder sitting in a jar on the mantelpiece. He threw it into the

fire and stepped in saying "Harry's Potions Classroom", remembering to tuck his cane in close to his body. He stumbled out of the fireplace in a large, well-lit classroom. The windows looked over the lake and there were three long tables in the middle of the room. A large cabinet stood on one wall and there was a large blackboard on an adjacent wall.

Just then Professor Snape stepped out of the fire and looked around. He eyed the windows with distaste but the rest of the room seemed to meet with his approval. He gestured for Harry to sit down at one of the tables and walked over to the cabinet. He started pulling various potion ingredients out and placed them on the table in front of Harry.

"You will start by repeating the exercise you failed so dismally with Master Nhean," he said briskly.

Harry sighed and picked up the first ingredient; this was going to be a long hour...and he had an Occlumency lesson after that.

When Snape finally let him go two hours later, he staggered back into Professor Dumbledore's office and debated whether to speak to him about Draco. He looked around but the Headmaster was not there. He shrugged and left the office, reminding himself to see the Headmaster sometime tomorrow. He headed back to Gryffindor Tower. He was just coming round the corner into the corridor where the Fat Lady hung when he bumped into Ginny. He caught her before she could fall and pulled her into his arms. He was surprised and a little taken aback when she stiffened and pulled away.

"Ginny? What's wrong?" he asked, a little hurt.

Ginny bit her lip. "Harry? Can I talk to you? In private."

Harry nodded and led her through the corridors until they reached the Room of Requirement. He followed Dobby's instructions and when he opened the door, they found a cosy room very similar to the Gryffindor common room. Harry gestured for Ginny to enter and shut the door.

Ginny walked over to the fireplace and settled herself in one of the chair in front on it. Harry looked at her with surprise and slowly settled himself into the matching chair opposite.

"Alright, Ginny, what's wrong?" he asked firmly.

Ginny was silent for a time. "Harry? Do you really like me?"

Harry sat stunned. "W..what? I...of course, I like you Ginny. I wouldn't be going out with you if I didn't! What brought this on?"

Ginny curled up in the chair. "I...I overheard what Draco said in the Entrance Hall tonight and then I started thinking. I mean, last year it

was like you didn't even know I existed and then all of a sudden you like me and want to go out with me. I...just wanted to know why."

Harry couldn't speak for a moment then he got his brain into gear. "Ginny," he said firmly, "for starters, ignore anything that Draco Malfoy says. He is a malicious bastard who likes nothing more than to create trouble. As for the rest, well, yeah I know I was a bit clueless the last couple of years. I mean, if I'd had half a brain in fourth year I would have asked you to be my date to the Yule Ball."

Ginny blushed and Harry knew he'd gotten that one right. When he'd thought back on that whole event, he had been fairly sure that Ginny had wanted him to ask her and he'd been too damn stupid to see it.

"Look, I had a...a bad upbringing," Harry continued. "Gee, Remus would be happy to hear me say that; he thinks I'm too soft on the Dursleys. Anyway, I didn't really know anything about girls, particularly how to talk to them. And well, you did have that crush on me and I didn't know how to deal with that either. Add to that the fact you're Ron's little sister and well, it was just all too complicated for me."

Ginny's blush had returned at the mention of her crush and she opened her mouth to say something but Harry beat her to it.

"When I...got hurt this summer," he said uncomfortably, "I had a lot of time to think about things. A lot of things. I mean, you spend a week wondering whether you're going to be blind or not and it's amazing what you'll think about in order to take your mind off things. I even thought a bit about Snape!" Ginny laughed softly and Harry continued.

"At some point during that week, it occurred to me that I didn't like the idea of you dating Dean and then it took me while to figure out why. It wasn't that I didn't like Dean; it was that I didn't like the idea of you going out with Dean. That I wanted you to be going out with me, not him. Of course, I didn't know how you felt which was a bit of a problem."

He smiled at Ginny and she blushed for a third time and smiled back.

"Thank you, Harry," she said softly. "I guess I was just a little bit insecure. I was afraid you still liked Cho or that you thought I still had a crush on you. Or that I was only going out with you because you rescued me from the Chamber."

Harry shrugged. "Well, I can tell you that whatever was going on between Cho and I isn't anymore. I think maybe I just had a crush on her. Anyway, there's nothing going on there. As for your crush and the rescue idea, well, you're the only one who knows the answer to that."

"I don't have a crush on you anymore," she said with certainty. "That kind of fizzled away in third year when you didn't even seem to notice me except as Ron's little sister. I did have a crush on you before I started school and an even bigger one after you rescued me from the Chamber but even the biggest crush doesn't last long when the subject of it doesn't seem to realise you exist." She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "But even when the crush died, I still liked you. Certainly more than I liked Michael Corner or Dean. You just didn't notice."

Harry laughed. "I told you I was clueless and I really did have a lot going on in those years. I guess I also didn't want to notice. It was only when I couldn't notice anything that I started thinking about everything."

"Well, I'm glad you realised I was more than just Ron's little sister this year," Ginny teased and then hesitated. "But Harry, what about what happened in the Chamber. Tom...Voldemort used me to open the Chamber. To let that basilisk out. That doesn't bother you?"

"No," Harry said simply, "because you said it yourself. He used you. It wasn't you who did all of that, it was him, it was Tom Riddle. Besides I did all of that as much to prove Hagrid was innocent and that I wasn't the Heir of Slytherin as for you. Look it could have been anybody that Mr Malfoy picked to give that diary to. That must have been why he was in the store that day, as he doesn't exactly strike me as being a fan of Gilderoy Lockhart. I mean it was a golden opportunity, what with it being so full of people." Harry looked a little shame-faced. "He probably chose you because of me, because I like your family." He shook his head as he remembered what Remus and Snape had told him about blaming himself for everything. "Or maybe it was because he doesn't like your Dad. Or maybe it was just that that was the first opportunity he had been presented with that day. Who knows? But it could have been anyone." He stopped and grinned. "Look at it this way; because it was you, Ron had absolutely no hesitation in going to the Chamber after you were taken down there."

Harry got up and went and sat down in front of Ginny. He took her hands in his. "Look Ginny, I don't know where this thing between us is going. I don't know if it's going to last. We've both got a lot on our plates this year. And I don't know if this will survive any of that. But I want to find out, I want to try. I really, really like you." He hesitated. "I don't know if I love you yet. Hell, until I got to Hogwarts I don't think I

really knew what love was and even now I'm still not sure. But as you said, we've got time to find out." Harry very carefully put all thoughts of being killed by Voldemort out of his mind.

Ginny slowly smiled with tears in her eyes. "Okay," she said shakily.

Harry smiled and pulled her gently down into his lap and kissed her.

Harry and Ron stood next to the Quidditch pitch in their team uniforms, brooms in hand. Hermione was sitting up in the stands, reading a book and looking after Harry's cane. Professor McGonagall had called the two of them into her office on the Tuesday of the first week of school and had asked them if they would consider being co-captains of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. She had told them that she had planned on giving the captaincy solely to Harry but had reconsidered after his blinding. Harry had laughed, much to her relief, and had said it was a good idea, that he wouldn't be able to see any team lists or strategy plans anyway. They had left her office deep in conversation about what they needed for the team this year. They eventually decided that they would hold open trials on Friday for the chaser and beater positions. It was short notice but they felt that with three new Chasers and possibly two new Beaters, they would need all the practice time they could get. Ginny, they both felt sure, would be a certainty for one Chaser position and Kirke and Sloper would have first dibs on the Beater positions.

They were now just waiting for those who wanted to try out to turn up. They were both a bit nervous until they saw a good number of broom-

bearing students coming out of the castle. They waited for about fifteen minutes for everyone to gather and then Harry cleared his throat. He and Ron had decided that Ron would concentrate on the tactics and strategy and he would lead the practice sessions. They would split the duties during games, as it would be hard for Harry to do much as Seeker; Ron would be able to see any deficiencies more easily in his Keeper position.

"Alright everyone," Harry said a little nervously. "My name is Harry Potter and this is Ron Weasley. We're Gryffindor's co-captains this year. I play Seeker and Ron's Keeper. Today we are looking for three new Chasers. We will also be looking for Beaters. Kirke, Sloper, you two have the front running for the Beater positions due to playing last year. We are also looking for reserves for all positions so even if you don't make the team, you may still make it as a reserve." He looked around the group. "Okay. Could those wanting to try out for a Chaser position stand over there and those going for a Beater position stand over there."

The students slowly sorted themselves out, with Ginny in the group of potential Chasers and Kirke and Sloper joining the group of potential Beaters. Harry and Ron divided the Chasers into groups of three and the Beaters into groups of two. Ron then took his position in front of the hoops and Harry sent up the first Chaser and Beater groups. He released the bludgers and then threw up the quaffle. Each group would get twenty minutes to show what they had while Harry and Ron watched.

They gradually worked through all of the potential players and then Harry asked for anyone who wanted to try for the back-up Seeker and Keeper positions. A handful of students stepped forward and he sent the rest to sit in the stands. Harry sent the Keeper candidates up one by one as Ron acted as Chaser. When they had finished with that Ron came back down and Harry took off. Ron sent the first of the

Seeker candidates up. They each competed with Harry to try and catch the snitch. None succeeded and only Ginny came close to beating him.

Harry caught the snitch one last time and signalled for the final Seeker candidate to fly down. He joined Ron and they sent everyone up to the stands while they decided on the team.

"Well, I think that Kirke and Sloper can keep their positions," Ron said and Harry nodded. The two Beaters from last year had obviously been practicing over the summer. While they still weren't in the class of Fred and George, they had improved markedly and neither Harry nor Ron had seen anyone better. "And they can be backed up by the Creevey brothers. They're pretty good there; better as Chasers but they were good Beaters."

"I think Ginny definitely gets one of the Chaser positions," Harry said, "and I think she'd better be the back-up Seeker as well. She was the only one who even threatened to catch the snitch. She's pretty good."

"Well, what did you expect?" Ron said with mock-indignation. "She's a Weasley!"

Harry laughed. "What did you think about the Creevey brothers as the other two Chasers?"

Ron scratched his head. "Yeah, they were the best of the lot, weren't they? They're used to flying with each other so I don't think they'll

have too much of a problem learning to fly with Ginny. Yeah, let's go with them. And then we can have Euan Abercrombie, Mark Davies and Seamus as the back-ups."

"Okay," Harry agreed, "Who did you like for the back-up Keeper position?"

Ron grimaced. "I think Trudy Olter. She's only second year but she showed some good reflexes." Harry nodded and they ran through the team and the reserves one more time just to be sure. Ron then called everyone down from the stands. When they had all gathered, Harry cleared his throat again.

"Okay, we've decided on the team. Ginny Weasley and Dennis and Colin Creevey are the new Chasers. Euan Abercrombie, Mark Davies and Seamus Finnegan are the reserves. Jack Kirke and Andrew Sloper are continuing as Beaters with the Creevey brothers as reserves. Ginny Weasley will be the reserve Seeker and Trudy Olter is the reserve Keeper. If those named could stay, the rest of you can go and thank you for trying out."

The unlucky students slowly headed back to the castle while Harry and Ron walked over to the stands with their new teammates.

"Okay," Ron said with a certain amount of fervour. "We'll be starting practice next week. I know it's early but we've had to replace almost half the team. Practice will be on Tuesday and Thursday nights and also on Saturday afternoons. We want all of you at all practices, even the back-ups. You never know when you might be needed. Those of

you who are new need to go and see Madam Hooch to be fitted for your uniforms. We'll have our first practice tomorrow afternoon."

Ron then dismissed the new Gryffindor team and he and Harry headed for the change rooms to get out of their quidditch uniforms, discussing what they should work on in training first.

Chapter 21

Severus Snape stared down into the cauldron with a bleak look on his face. The first month of school had flown far quicker than he wanted and now the last of the potions that the Dark Lord had ordered him to make was ready. The Egeovenenum potion, which was highly addictive, bubbled softly and he moved almost automatically to bottle it. Four large potion bottles took the cauldron's contents and Severus then placed them carefully into separate compartments in a potion bag. He placed the bag in the cabinet in his office and locked the door. He then headed out of the office and headed towards the Guild classroom. It was a Friday evening so he knew he would find Potter there.

He knocked on the door to the Guild classroom and carefully opened it. Inside he found Potter and his friends sparring with swords. He watched for a moment. Potter, he could see, was the most skilled of the six students. He was sparring with Longbottom. Severus was startled to see the amount skill that the normally timid and clumsy Gryffindor was showing. He was also startled to see the grim and determined expression on Longbottom's face. The Weasley's were sparring with each other and seemed to be about equal in terms of skill. Granger was sparring with Lovegood and they were clearly the most awkward. Both seemed to be uncomfortable with the weapons they were holding. Nhean spotted him at this point and walked quietly over to where he was standing in the doorway.

"Yes, Severus? How can I help you?" the diminutive little Master asked with a smile.

"Potter needs to accompany me to the Headmaster's office," he said bluntly and Nhean's face became sober.

"It's finished then?" he asked and Severus nodded. Nhean eyed him for a moment and turned back to the students. He walked carefully up to Harry and Neville and clapped his hands twice. The two boys stepped back from each other, sheathed their swords and grounded them. They then turned to look at Master Nhean.

"Harry, Professor Snape would like you to accompany him to the Headmaster's office," Nhean said with a worried look on his face.

Harry looked startled and then thought for a moment. His face cleared and he frowned as he realised what this was most likely to be about. He nodded to Neville and his Master and walked over to the table. He picked up his Runespoor and allowed Orinda to wrap himself around his neck. He then walked over to the Potions Master, his cane tapping in front of him. They made their way up to Dumbledore's office without a word.

The Headmaster welcomed them and offered them tea and lemon drops. They both accepted the former and refused the latter. When they were settled, Dumbledore looked at them with wise eyes.

"It's finished then, Severus?" he asked.

"Yes," Snape replied flatly. "I will go now. I wished to warn both you and Mr Potter." He turned to look at the young Gryffindor. "You must

shield yourself well tonight. I do not know if the Dark Lord will act tonight or not but I must assume that he will."

Harry nodded.

"I think it might be best if you remained here, Harry," Dumbledore said seriously. "This room is well-warded which will aid you in your shielding. And I would like to be available to help, if necessary."

Harry nodded again. "Could Remus be here too?" he asked nervously.

"Of course," the Headmaster said kindly.

"I will send him up," Snape said, rising from his chair. "I should go now."

Dumbledore nodded and rose as well. He gripped Snape's shoulders. "Be careful, my boy."

Snape nodded and headed for the door, a grim expression on his face. He had just put his hand on the handle when Harry spoke.

"Be careful, sir."

Snape turned to look at Harry and nodded slowly then left the room.

Snape apparated once again into the formal parlour of Malfoy Manor, startling the house elf who was cleaning the room. It squeaked and then bowed low to him. He ignored it and drew the bag of potions closer to himself. He left the parlour and walked towards Lucius' study and knocked on the door.

It was answered by Lucius himself who raised an elegant eyebrow when he saw what was in Severus' hands. He opened the door to let him in.

"Master, it is Severus," he said unctuously.

"Ah, Severus, welcome," Voldemort hissed. "What do you have to report?"

"The last of the potions is finished, Lord," Severus said respectfully, bowing low before his master and placing the bag on the desk.

Voldemort's red eyes seemed to flare and he smiled in triumph. "Excellent, Severus. Your loyal service will not be forgotten. Lucius, summon Wormtail and have Croaker prepare for our arrival in the Ministry." Lucius bowed and left the room. "Severus, get the rest of the potions and return here." Severus also bowed and left the room.

He was back shortly with another potion bag. This one held a variety of potions and Severus opened the one he had just brought and lifted out one of the bottles of Egeovenenum potion. He placed this in the other bag and slung it over his shoulder. The door opened and Wormtail walked in, followed by Lucius Malfoy.

"It is done, Master," Lucius said smoothly. "Croaker is waiting for us and will bring us into the Department of Mysteries."

"Excellent," Voldemort hissed. "Come."

The Dark Lord stood and stalked out of the study, Severus, Lucius and Wormtail falling in behind him. They walked through to the parlour Severus had arrived in and Voldemort turned and faced them.

"We shall floo into the Ministry," he said. "Severus, I wish you to be by my side. It will be your skills that will be need most of all. Lucius, Wormtail, you will stay with Croaker. See that we are not disturbed for any reason." He then paused and smiled mirthlessly. "And I think I will make sure that there are no eavesdroppers." He pulled a small crystal amulet out from under his robes and held it in his hand. He concentrated on it and muttered a few words under his breath. The amulet flared brightly then subsided. "That's better," the Dark Lord

muttered and Snape became sure that Potter could no longer see them. "Let us go," Voldemort hissed.

The three men bowed and one by one, they flooded out of Malfoy Manor and into the Ministry. Archibald Croaker was indeed waiting for them, under the influence of Lucius' Imperious spell. He had four long black hooded cloaks, which he handed to them. They donned the cloaks and Croaker turned and led them into the Ministry. The foyer was devoid of life and they quickly made their way to the Department of Mysteries. Croaker stopped at the door and Lucius and Wormtail joined him. Voldemort and Severus walked through and the Dark Lord led Snape through the revolving room into the Veil Chamber. A muscle in Snape's cheek twitched; he couldn't imagine what the Dark Lord could want here.

"Wait over there, Severus," Voldemort hissed. "You cannot help me in this part. You must be ready when I am finished."

Snape bowed in acknowledgment and walked over to where the Dark Lord had indicated. As he watched, the Dark Lord once again drew the crystal amulet out and then pulled another small crystal out of his robes. He placed the crystal in front of the Veil and stepped back. He began slowly chanting in a strange sibilant language that soundly oddly, but not quite, like Celtic to Snape's ears. The crystal rose off the floor until it was hovering at head height in front of the Veil and the amulet around the Dark Lord's neck began to glow with a black light.

The Dark Lord continued his chanting and the hovering crystal rose again until it was directly over the Veil. The crystal amulet glowed darker and the Dark Lord's chanting became louder and more forceful. He then shouted three sharp words and the two crystals flared,

forcing Snape to look away. When the light died, he turned back and saw the Dark Lord lying unconscious on the floor. The crystal amulet was blackened and burned. He turned to look at the Veil and gasped in shock when he saw a gaunt, shaggy-haired figure lying curled up and also unconscious on the stone floor in front of the Veil. There was no sign of the second crystal.

Snape hurried over to his master and muttered, "Enervate." The Dark Lord shifted and slowly began to sit up. Snape then walked over to the other unconscious figure and turned it over. It was Sirius Black. He looked gaunt and drawn and his breathing was slow. Snape turned to look at his master.

"Do you want him woken, Lord?" he asked a little shakily.

"No, Severus," the Dark Lord said with triumph in his voice. "That will come later. Do what you can to heal him and make sure you give him a dose of the Egeovenenum potion." He stripped off the black robe he was wearing. "Wrap him up in this and levitate him. Lucius has a room set up for him at his Manor. We can do the rest there."

Snape nodded, his thoughts swirling in his mind as he knelt down next to Black. He followed his master's instructions and then wrapped Black in the cloak and levitated him. They made their way back out of the Ministry and rejoined Lucius, Wormtail and Croaker. The two Death Eaters eyed the levitated body with interest.

"Obliviate him," Voldemort said, waving at Croaker dismissively, "and then join us outside the room you prepared for my guest." Lucius and

Wormtail nodded and the Dark Lord and Snape made their way with Black back to the foyer, where they flooed back to Malfoy Manor.

Snape followed his master down the corridors of the Manor, still directing Black's unconscious body in front of him. He was thinking desperately, trying to work out what the Dark Lord planned to do with Potter's godfather. He wasn't worried about the addiction that the Egeovenenum would cause. In the course of developing the potion, he had also developed a counteragent to it. He had, however, not informed the Dark Lord of that particular development. He resigned himself to having to find some way of getting Black out. Dumbledore, as well as Potter and Lupin, would want it.

Voldemort finally came to a stop in front of a door that had three large locks on it and a small closed aperture. He opened the door and gestured for Snape to guide Black into the room. Snape did so, settling the unconscious man onto the bed in the room. He then looked curiously at his master.

"Give him some Veritaserum and then wake him," Voldemort ordered.

Snape nodded and did as instructed. Black slowly woke at Snape's "Enervate" and looked curiously around the room. Relief and joy slowly flooded into his face. He sat up gingerly and looked down the front of his shirt. He grinned and finally looked up. Snape was barely able to keep his surprise off his face when Black showed no sign of recognition of either of them.

"Welcome, Sirius," Voldemort said with amusement. "Did I not tell you I could free you?"

Snape was shocked when Sirius laughed. "So you're my 'friend'? And yes, you did. Though I confess I did doubt you at times."

Voldemort hissed laughter. "That is understandable. It took some time to achieve. Tell me what do you remember?"

Sirius frowned. "I remember my name is Sirius and I remember a couple of faces. I also remember a couple of names but I don't know who they are."

"Describe the faces."

Sirius obediently did so and Snape was easily able to recognise the faces as being those of James and Harry Potter. Voldemort also recognised them and smiled maliciously.

"And what about these names?" Voldemort asked.

"I remember the names Harry and Voldemort," Sirius said, scratching his head, "but I don't know who they are. Do you?" He looked up, genuine confusion on his face and Snape struggled for a moment not to react.

"Yes, I do," Voldemort said smoothly. "But you do not need to worry yourself about them just yet. Get some sleep, Sirius. You must rest to get better."

Sirius nodded and absently rubbed his chest. "Yes, I think you're right." He then stopped and looked at the two of them with a relieved, boyish smile. "Wait! Won't you tell me your name now? And your friend's?"

Voldemort hissed laughter. "Yes, why not? My name is Tom Riddle and my...friend's...name is Severus Snape."

Sirius' smile widened. "Well, thank you, Tom, Severus, for rescuing me."

"Your welcome," Voldemort said, his eyes glinting. "Now get some rest."

He gestured for Snape to leave and closed the door behind them, engaging the locks. Lucius and Wormtail were waiting for them outside the room.

"Lucius, these locks are not to be undone except in my presence. He is to be well fed. If I find any signs of neglect, Lucius, I shall be most displeased." Voldemort glared at him and Lucius paled and bowed. "You are to see that a dose the Egeovenenum potion is placed in his evening meal every day." Lucius nodded and Severus handed him the bottle he had in his bag.

Voldemort eyed his three Death Eaters with satisfaction. "I am well pleased with your work today, especially yours Severus. You have proven your loyalty most satisfactorily. You may all go."

They all bowed deeply and Severus made his shaky way back to the parlour and apparated to Hogsmeade. He paused after he apparated and looked towards the village for a long moment. He had a tremendous urge to head to the Hog's Head for a long stiff drink. He sighed and headed back up to the castle. The Headmaster would need to know what had just happened...and Potter...and Lupin.

Half an hour later Severus was sitting in a chair in the Headmaster's office, glass of Firewhiskey in his hand. Dumbledore and Potter were sitting watching him, the Headmaster sipping on a cup of tea and Potter fidgeting with his cane. Lupin had apparently gone back to his rooms briefly and Severus insisted on waiting for his return as he refused to tell this tale more than once. A knock came on the door and, on the Headmaster's word, Lupin came into the office. He turned a confused and concerned look on everyone in the room and sat down on the couch next to Harry. Dumbledore put down his cup of tea and turned to Severus.

"Well, Severus?" he asked gently.

Severus looked down into his glass then looked up at Harry. "At what point did you stop seeing what was going on, Mr Potter?"

Harry looked at him with surprise. "How did you know?" he stammered. "It was when you were all in the parlour, before going to the Ministry. He said something about stopping eavesdroppers and then the vision stopped."

Severus grunted and took a drink. He looked at the Headmaster. "I don't know what kind of magic it was that the Dark Lord discovered, Albus, but I saw the effects of it tonight. Twice. The first was when the Dark Lord stopped Mr Potter's visions. The second was...later. He used a crystal amulet of some kind and the amulet in conjunction with another crystal at the later point."

Albus frowned. "Crystals," he mused. "How unusual. Well, I have somewhere to take my research now. Please continue, Severus."

"I am sure that Mr Potter has informed you of what happened up to the point where he was blocked," Severus said and shifted in his seat. "When we got to the Ministry, Croaker took us down to the Department of Mysteries. Lucius and Wormtail remained with Croaker at the entrance at the Dark Lord's instruction. He and I continued until we got to...the Veil Chamber." Harry gasped and paled, his hands shaking until he gripped his cane tightly. "The Dark Lord used the crystals I told you about to perform some kind of...ritual. It involved chanting of some description, Albus. It almost sounded Celtic but I didn't understand it and there were distinctive sibilant undertones to it."

Snape paused and took another drink. "The crystals flared at the end of the ritual and I did not see precisely what happened but when I turned back the Dark Lord was unconscious and...and Sirius Black was lying on the floor in front of the Veil."

Harry leapt to his feet, all of the colour draining from his face and his cane clattered to the floor. He stared at Snape with disbelief for a long moment then his eyes rolled back into his head and he crumpled at their feet. Remus, who had been staring at Snape with equal disbelief and an equally pale face, started at Harry's collapse and swore. He jumped to his feet and lifted Harry onto the couch. As he did Harry groaned and his eyes fluttered open. He stared blankly at Remus for a moment and then gasped and sat up. He turned to Snape, his eyes pleading.

"Sir, are...are you sure it was S...Sirius," he asked anxiously.

Snape nodded solemnly. "Yes, Mr Potter. It was Black. After he had recovered, the Dark Lord and I returned with Black to Malfoy Manor. Croaker was obliviated. The Dark Lord had had Lucius prepare a room in Malfoy Manor for Black. When we got him there, the Dark Lord had me enervate him. He...does not remember much. He remembers his first name, your name Potter and the Dark Lord's name. He also remembers two faces, yours and your father's, Potter. But he does not remember the significance of the names or the faces. He does not even remember his own family name."

Harry had started shaking at this list, his face filling with distress and Snape was forced to take some pity on the young man.

"The condition can be corrected, Mr Potter," he said calmly. "Unlike the muggle world, the wizarding world has Memory Restoring Potions."

Harry calmed a little then calmed even further when Remus lay a hand on his shoulder and spoke. "He's alive, Harry! That's all that is important right now."

At those two statements, Harry began to lose some of his shock and slowly, slowly a smile began to curve his lips. Tears filled his eyes and he threw himself into Remus' arms, crying and laughing at the same time. Remus drew him into a deep hug and held him until he calmed down, tears standing in his own eyes. Eventually Harry pulled out of his guardian's arms and settled back down on the couch. He looked up at Snape, his eyes red-rimmed but containing a carefully suppressed glee.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said and Snape waved the apology away.

"The Dark Lord has instructed Lucius to make sure that Black is well cared for but has not chosen to inform us as to what he has planned," Snape continued wearily. "Albus, the Egeovenenum was for Black. I have brewed the counteragent." He paused. "It appears that the Dark Lord was able to communicate with Black...wherever he was. He had clearly gained Black's trust. Black referred to him as 'friend' and asked for our names. And thanked him for rescuing him."

Harry started frowning. "Sir? You said that Sirius recognised the...the Dark Lord's name? Then why didn't he react to the name."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Because the Dark Lord referred to himself by his real name, Mr Potter. Tom Riddle."

Harry nodded slowly and then looked at the adults in the room, his face becoming determined. "So what are you going to do?" he demanded. "How are you going to get Sirius out of there?"

"Not going to try anything yourself, Mr Potter?" Snape said silkily.

Harry looked soberly at him. "No, sir, I learnt my lesson. I'm not going to do anything rash." He paused and his face became hard and a touch of accusation and anger crept into his eyes. "Not unless all of you do nothing. He's my godfather. I want him out of there. I want him back."

Remus' lips quirked; for the first time, Harry sounded like his father as well as looking like him. Albus' eyes twinkled as Snape raised a very acidic eyebrow. They too had recognised from where Harry had drawn that strength. Albus nodded to himself.

"We will get him out, Harry. I would not be so cruel," the Headmaster said quietly.

Harry nodded and relaxed.

The Headmaster looked at Snape. "Is there anything else you need to tell us, Severus?"

Snape shook his head and downed the last of his Firewhiskey. "No, Headmaster. And I would prefer not to start planning anything right now, if you please. I am tired."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded. "Indeed you are correct," he said with a smile. "I think we all need some rest. Do not worry, Harry. We know that Sirius will not be harmed and clearly whatever Tom is planning will not happen immediately. We have time to plan properly. For now we should rest. You have had a tumultuous evening."

Harry looked mutinous for a moment then shut his eyes and nodded. They all stood and Snape, Remus and Harry left the office.

Harry deliberately lagged behind Snape, allowing the Potions Master to get a good head start on them. Remus kept pace with him, eyeing his young charge with worried eyes.

"Harry?" he said, not entirely sure what he was asking.

"Can...can we go back to the suite?" Harry asked tightly.

"Of course," Remus said and they turned towards their home from the holidays.

After they walked in, Harry headed for the couch and slumped down onto it. Remus sat next to him and Harry leaned into him. Remus put his arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Sirius is alive," Harry said wonderingly.

"Yes," Remus replied with a smile.

Harry laughed with growing delight. "Figures," he said.

Remus laughed; a wonderful youthful laugh. "Yes," he said with a voice full of mirth. "Sirius always did have the ability to fall face-first into a pile of garbage and come up with a mouthful of diamonds." He looked at Harry and his smile wavered a bit. "You've got your godfather back, Harry. Your...real guardian."

Harry grinned then his expression faltered. "I...but Remus, I still want you to be my guardian. I...don't know..." His voice trailed off.

Harry was genuinely lost. While he was thrilled to have Sirius back, he didn't want to lose what he had forged with Remus. He looked at his guardian, a forlorn expression on his face.

The expression on Harry's face wrenched Remus' heart. He didn't want to lose Harry but he knew that Sirius was the boy's proper guardian.

"It's alright, Harry," he said with a tight smile. "I'm sure Sirius and I will be able to work something out."

Harry hugged Remus. "I hope so," he said shakily. "I don't want to lose anybody else...in any way."

Remus nodded wordlessly and the two of them sat in silence. After a few minutes, Harry frowned.

"What did Snape mean about the Egeovenenum potion and the counteragent?" he asked.

Remus' breath caught. Albus had told him about the Egeovenenum three weeks ago and he'd been horrified. He still hadn't decided whether he was horrified that the potion existed or that Severus had been forced to develop it. He did have a certain admiration for Severus for developing the counteragent hand-in-glove with the potion itself, particularly as he'd done it all under the eye of Voldemort when he first joined the Death Eaters. He sighed and braced himself to answer Harry's question.

"Egeovenenum was developed by Severus," Remus said slowly, "when he first joined the Death Eaters, before he came back to our side. It's...purpose is to create an addiction. It only takes one dose and your addicted to the potion. You must have it every day. If not, the side effects are terrible. Something like being subjected to the Cruciatus curse and being pounded by sledgehammers at the same time. If you have been taking it for long enough, the withdrawal can kill you."

Harry was staring at Remus with growing horror. "Snape developed that?" he asked, aghast.

Remus looked at him and hurried to reassure him. "Oh no, Harry, Severus didn't do it willingly. He's not that kind of man. Voldemort wanted it for some sick purpose of his own. But Severus was able to develop a counteragent to the Egeovenenum and he did it while he was developing the potion. Under Voldemort's nose. That took a lot of courage and cleverness. The counteragent strips the Egeovenenum out of the bloodstream."

Harry was a little surprised at the admiration in Remus' voice as he spoke of the Potions Master's cunning but had to admit his guardian had a point. The news of the counteragent did have the effect of calming him; no matter how badly Sirius became addicted, they could at least reverse it. He leaned back into the couch and fiddled with his cane.

"Remus? Could I stay here tonight?" he asked quietly.

"Of course," Remus replied and they lapsed back into their separate silences.

Chapter 22

Harry was quiet and subdued when he joined his friends for breakfast the next morning and they watched him with concern. They became doubly concerned when they realised that he had disengaged his Oversight as soon as he had put his breakfast on his plate. He had not done this often since learning about Oversight but whenever he had it was because he was particularly unhappy about something. He seemed to feel that if something was wrong he didn't want to see anything; that the blackness was preferable. Ron, Ginny and Hermione attempted to get him involved in the conversation but he clearly wasn't in the mood to cooperate. When he stood to leave, Ginny decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Harry?" she asked firmly. "What's wrong? You know you can tell us."

Harry stopped in his tracks and turned to face his friends, looking a little shamed. "I...Look, can I tell you later?" he said quietly. "I'm not sure how much of this I can tell you and I have my er, thing with er, Professor Dumbledore." Harry hesitated over the last; not having his Oversight active meant he wasn't sure who was near.

"But you will tell us, won't you?" Ginny pressed.

Harry smiled tiredly. "Yes, as much as I can. Just...later, alright?"

Ginny caught his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Okay, Harry. Just don't shut us out."

Harry smiled again and kissed her hand. He then tapped his way out of the Hall. He made his way along the corridors and stairways towards the Headmaster's office. He hadn't slept much last night and had come down late to breakfast, not worrying overly because it was Saturday. He had debated whether or not to go to his Potions lesson today. The lack of sleep would not enhance his ability but eventually decided he had to. Snape would be there, of course; the man had never missed a class even after being subjected to the Cruciatus curse and it would not look good if he missed simply because he was tired.

He tapped along the corridors in his self-imposed darkness, deep in thought. Thus when he was grabbed and slung into a classroom, he was totally unprepared. Unlike when he faced the Lethifold, this time he managed to hang onto his cane. As soon as his momentum stopped, he rolled to his feet and stood in a crouch, listening carefully as he initiated his Oversight. He heard the whistle of the fist through the air and ducked and rolled. As he came up, he drew his sword and, Oversight now active, saw three figures in the room with him. He was not surprised to find that it was Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. He sighed; Malfoy was being particularly persistent this year. He then noticed that the three Slytherins were backing slowly towards the door and he grinned. They obviously hadn't expected him to react the way he did and they undoubtedly hadn't expected him to draw a sword. In fact, they were the first people outside of his friends and the teachers to even know about the sword. As he watched, grinning triumphantly, the three boys quickly slid out of the door. Harry snorted with contempt as he sheathed his sword and he left the classroom to continue his journey up to the Headmaster's office.

When he got there, he nodded at Dumbledore and flooed through to his potions classroom. Snape was waiting for him and for once the

Potions Master did not look much better than he did. Obviously he was not the only one who had not slept well.

"Sir?" Harry asked before Snape could say anything. "During the holidays I asked you whether you would tell me about the potion you were brewing for Vol...the Dark Lord. Will you tell me now?"

Snape sighed and, much to Harry's surprise, slumped into a chair. He scrubbed his face with his hands and when he looked back up at Harry, he looked old and weary.

"Sit down, Mr Potter, and I will attempt to explain," he said dully.

Harry slowly walked over and sat down opposite the Potions Master.

"You realise that you will probably regret asking me this question?" Snape asked with a poor imitation of his normal glare.

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir, but I think I need to know."

Snape closed his eyes and nodded. He then seemed to get lost in thought. "Mr Potter," he said finally, "why do you think I joined the Death Eaters?"

"I...well, I don't really know, sir," Harry stammered in surprise. "Um, I thought perhaps it was because they offered you respect and acceptance but that doesn't seem a very good reason. Erm, then I thought perhaps it was because you had something they wanted or perhaps because they offered you the opportunity to do any kind of research that maybe the Ministry would get worried about. But, really sir, I don't know."

Snape smirked sourly at the list of reasons. "Your last two options are closer to the truth, Mr Potter. Do you know what hubris is?"

Harry shook his head silently, not entirely sure what to make of this mood that the Potions Master was in.

"Hubris," Snape mused, "is a dangerous thing. It is the arrogance and over-confidence that leads one to ruin and disaster. I achieved my Mastery in Potions only six months after graduating from Hogwarts. I was eighteen, Mr Potter, and I was the youngest person to ever achieve any Mastery in any subject. Hubris was a good description of my attitude at that point in time. That hubris was dented a little in the next six months. I couldn't get a job. I wasn't interested in teaching; I wanted a research position but no one would hire an eighteen year old Potions Master. I never did find out why. Then just as I was getting truly frustrated, Lucius Malfoy approached me. I knew him, of course; he was two years ahead of me at Hogwarts. He said he knew someone who was interested in hiring me. It would be on a consultancy basis until he was sure I was what he wanted. I worked for the Dark Lord for four months before I found out exactly whom I was working for but by then they had me. I had been asked to produce a number of very delicate potions; ones that required the skill of a Potions Master and I had produced them perfectly. I was well-paid for them and they were very flattering about my skills."

Snape stood at this point and began to pace around the room as he continued. "In hindsight, I would say they fawned over me. But I was young and did not recognise it for what it was. Lucius, whom I had spoken about six words to at school, began to invite me to dinners and parties. He showed interest in me and my opinions. He offered me the opportunity to carry out any kind of research I wished, all funded by my mysterious employer. He very skilfully gathered my opinions on the muggleborn and muggles and equally skilfully pointed me in the direction he wanted. When he took me to meet the Dark Lord for the first time, I was pleased, even eager, to take the Dark Mark. I did not think beyond the opportunities that I was being offered. My hubris led me right into the trap, Mr Potter."

Snape walked back to the chair and sat down again. "But then the Dark Lord began asking for potions that were steeped in Dark magic. And finally when he could not find the potion he wanted, he asked me to invent it. To develop a potion that would cause addiction, so that whoever had taken it would need it, would have to take it or suffer. This was when I began to have second thoughts about my decision. I had rarely been to Death Eater functions. The Dark Lord has always valued my skills over anything else I might have to offer and I had made it plain that I thought many of their activities were beneath me and my intellect. So I had managed to convince myself that what was happening was not my problem and not something to worry about. But this, what the Dark Lord had asked me, had shaken even my hubris. This was some of the darkest of things that he was asking me to make and I had no choice but to obey. Even I knew that there was no leaving the Death Eaters. Regulus Black had tried and the Dark Lord had summoned us all to witness the penalty for betrayal. That was not a path I cared to take."

"Was that why you...chose to become a spy?" Harry asked. He was alternately fascinated by this insight into the normally taciturn Potions Master and taken aback by the bitterness and self-hatred that had crept into his tone.

Snape blinked and looked at Harry. His gaze hardened for a second. "It...was part of the reason, Mr Potter, but not the whole of it. The full reason...is none of your business." Harry nodded and Snape continued. "The potion that the Dark Lord asked me to develop was the one that was given to your godfather. The Egeovenenum potion, I chose to call it. I developed the counteragent to it at the same time. I could not, in all conscious, develop the potion alone. I did not develop this potion because I wished to, Mr Potter, but because I had gotten myself into a situation, through my own hubris, that I could not easily get out of. My only consolation is that the potion is nearly impossible for any but the most skilled of potion makers to brew. Professor Dumbledore ensured that the Ministry found out about it, though he did not tell them who had invented it. It is forbidden to make the potion which would discourage most of those who would attempt it. The rest would be discouraged by the difficulty of the task. If they even knew how to make it. I have never written the full process down. I dare not and I burned the notes I had made during my experimentation. The only one other than the Headmaster whom I have told about the process is the Dark Lord himself and he is not skilled enough to make it."

"Well, that's good," said Harry as he thought about what Snape had told him. After a few minutes he looked up. "Thank you for telling me that, sir," he said quietly. "I...I never knew why I should trust you before this but...well, I do now and I'm sorry that I haven't before."

Snape raised an eyebrow at this admission but nodded solemnly in acknowledgement nevertheless. He stood and quietly began to gather some potion ingredients while Harry thought some more.

"Sir?" Harry asked finally. "Do you have any idea how we can get Sirius out of there?"

Snape stopped and looked at Harry with a blank expression on his face. Eventually he grimaced. "No, Mr Potter, though I do know it would be unwise to try anything right now. The Dark Lord has some plan involving Black. It could be dangerous for all concerned to try anything before I can find out what that plan is."

Harry sighed with frustration and defeat. "I...guess your right," he said dully.

"Yes, I am," said Snape with some of his usual acerbity. "Now, Mr Potter, I believe we are here for a Potions lesson. Come over here and tell me what potion these ingredients would be used in. Then tell me what their purpose is in the potion. If you manage to get those two things right, I may permit you to attempt to brew it."

Harry sighed and slid off the chair to see if his potions ability was improving.

Sirius sat cross-legged on his bed, his back against the wall. He'd been a bit surprised to find that he was locked in when he woke up this morning. He thought that Tom would probably have a good reason but there was some part of him that was strongly protesting about being confined. It was that part that was making him a bit

uneasy. It was as though the part of his brain that still remembered everything was trying to warn him about something. The problem was he had no reason that he could remember to be this jumpy. Breakfast had been provided this morning and had been good. Lunch had been equally good. The room was comfortably furnished and there was a well provided, if small, bathroom. He was warm, well-fed, comfortable and alive; he wasn't really sure what he had to complain about.

He was startled out of his thoughts by the door opening and Tom entering.

"How are you feeling today, Sirius," he asked.

"Much better," Sirius replied with a smile. The smile faltered. "Tom? Why am I locked in?"

"For your safety," Voldemort said smoothly. "This house belongs to an associate of mine. He is accepting of you being here but some of his friends may not be. I do not wish you to come to any harm."

Sirius face cleared; that was a fairly logical argument. He frowned again. "Why wouldn't they be accepting of me?"

"Because you are a condemned criminal, Sirius," Voldemort said with the barest hint of glee in his eyes. "You escaped from prison three years ago."

Sirius stared at Tom, aghast. "W...what did I do?" he stammered.

"You murdered your best friend and his wife," Voldemort replied bluntly, "and you then went and killed another friend along with 12 muggles."

The blood drained from Sirius' face and his eyes became bleak. "Why?" he whispered.

"Because they betrayed you. Your reaction was a bit extreme, I'll admit, but you can't be faulted for repaying betrayal," Voldemort said smoothly and then stepped back to judge the effects of what he had said on the man in front of him. There was an art to doing this and he was well skilled in that art. The trick was not overwhelming the subject too much at the start. Shock them with something that was a close version of the truth and then let them stew. Eventually they would believe you and that would make believing future 'truths' so much easier. He decided he had done enough for today, now it was time to let Sirius stew on those statements for a while.

"I should go," he said in a parody of gentleness. "I've given you a shock and you need to sort this out."

Sirius nodded absently and Voldemort left the room. As soon as he was alone, Sirius slid down onto the floor and wept bitterly. Of all the things he had thought about himself, he had never thought that he might be a murderer. Fifteen people, he wailed silently, I killed fifteen people. He wrapped his arms around himself and shook.

Harry left his Potions lessons feeling both exhausted and pleased. His reading had paid off and he had been able to answer all of Snape's questions but trying to brew a potion with nothing more than Oversight was an entirely new challenge. He had no way of judging the colour of the potion for a start and he had to memorise the instructions since he couldn't read with Oversight. Thankfully he'd been making a fairly simple potion that didn't have too many steps and he'd gotten it mostly right. Snape had even been vaguely complimentary, for his standards, and nothing had exploded.

He stumbled out of the fire into Dumbledore's office to find that the Headmaster wasn't there again. That had been the norm for these lessons. Harry wasn't sure whether it was because Dumbledore was being considerate and whether he was just incredibly busy. He didn't have time to think about it though; he was waylaid by Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna the moment he stepped out into the corridor. They hustled him off to the Room of Requirement, which once again had looked similar to the Gryffindor common room, and sat him down in a comfortable chair.

"Alright, mate," Ron said firmly. "What's happened?"

Harry sighed and then grinned weakly. He wondered how long his friends had been waiting for him to get out of his Potions lesson. Then the grin faltered and shut his eyes.

"Harry?" Ginny said softly, placing one hand on his knee. He covered her hand with his own and opened his eyes.

"Sirius is alive," he said. The others stared at him for a long moment and then broke out in exclamations and questions. Harry finally waved them to silence.

"It happened last night. Voldemort did some kind of magic in the room with the Veil and somehow got Sirius out of there. Snape was there, he saw it. That's why Voldemort wanted those potions; he wanted to use them on Sirius," Harry said quietly.

"Where is Sirius now?" Hermione asked.

"In Malfoy Manor somewhere," Harry replied.

"So what are we going to do?" Ron asked excitedly.

"We're not doing anything," Harry said flatly. The others gaped at him in surprise and he scowled at them. "Last time we did something, look what happened. Besides Snape said that trying to get Sirius out before he finds out what Voldemort has planned could be dangerous and I trust him on that."

"You trust Snape?" Ron said in disbelief.

"Yes," said Harry in a tone that brooked no argument. "He got the information to us. He's trying to come up with a plan to get Sirius out of there and he doesn't even like Sirius. He's on our side, Ron."

"How do you know that?" Ron persisted.

Harry paused. "I...I just know, Ron. Please just trust me," Harry said quietly, hoping his first and best friend would understand.

Ron looked at Harry for a long moment, a worried expression in his eyes. Finally he sighed. "Okay, Harry."

Harry relaxed then smiled grimly. "Of course, I did tell Dumbledore that if they took too long, I would take matters into my own hands."

The others grinned; now that sounded more like the Harry they knew.

Two weeks later, late in the evening, pain shot through Severus Snape's left arm. He gasped and clutched at the Mark then quickly rose and headed to the fire. He threw a handful of floo powder in and quickly informed the Headmaster that he had been summoned. He then made his way out of the castle until he was outside the anti-apparition wards and answered the summons.

Once again he apparated into the Malfoy's formal parlour. This time it was the Dark Lord himself who was waiting for him. He bowed low before his master.

"Welcome, Severus," Voldemort hissed, clearly in a very good mood. "Come. Sit."

The Dark Lord sat in a chair in front of the fire and Severus walked over and sat down in the chair opposite.

"Tell me, Severus, how easy would it be for you to get a person into Hogwarts?" Voldemort asked, his fingers steepled in front of his face, his red eyes glued on Snape.

Severus blinked and thought. "During the day, almost impossible. There would be too many people, both staff and students, around. But it might be possible at night when everyone is asleep." He did not ask why; he knew from long and sometimes painful experience that if the Dark Lord wanted him to know the 'why' of anything he would tell him.

"Good, good," Voldemort hissed. "And what about getting someone into the Gryffindor tower?"

"All of the teachers are given the current passwords to all of the dormitories, in case of an emergency, so that would be not a problem."

"Excellent," Voldemort hissed, his eyes almost glowing. "I would like you to spend some time with my guest, Severus. He is coming along very nicely and I want him to trust you as he trusts me."

Severus nodded. "Yes, Lord."

"He believes that he was betrayed by Potter, Potter's wife and Pettigrew and that he killed those three plus twelve others. He believes that he has escaped from prison to ensure that Potter's son does not cause trouble, does not become evil. I have convinced him that the boy is destined to become the next Dark Wizard and that he is the only one who is capable of stopping him. Do not deviate from that, Severus." Voldemort stopped and chuckled; a thin, evil sound that made the hair of the back of Severus' neck stand up. "I will use Sirius Black to kill Harry Potter. The idiot godfather murdering his own fool godson. I intend to make sure that he remembers everything after he has killed his godson, Severus. It will be beautiful."

Voldemort threw his head back and laughed while Severus shivered. As much as he disliked Black, that was a fate that he would not wish on anybody.

"Go, Severus," Voldemort ordered with amusement. "Go and become friends with Black. The locks will open for you; simply place your hand on them."

Severus rose and bowed. He left the room and headed for Black's room. He paused outside the room to regain his composure and placed his hand on each of the locks. There was a quiet click as each unlocked and he opened the door and entered. Sirius looked up when he entered and Snape was only just successful in containing his shock. Black had looked gaunt and ill when he had seen him in the Veil Chamber but now, while he had lost a lot of that particular look with regular meals, he now looked drawn and his eyes were bleak and almost dead. There was no curiosity in his face and Severus wondered what exactly the Dark Lord had done.

"Sirius," he said in greeting and got a small nod in reply. "Do you remember me?"

Sirius blinked slowly. "You...you're S...Severus," he said finally.

Severus looked at Black for a moment longer then came to a snap decision. He turned around and drew his wand, locking the door and casting a silencing spell. He then turned back to Black and pulled out a small vial from his robes. He had placed the vial in his robes a week ago when he was checking the supplies in the cabinet in his office. The situation with Black had been playing on his mind and when he had gotten to his stocks of Memory Restoring Potions he had slipped a small vial into his robes without really thinking why. He crouched down in front of Black, spearing him with a dark glare and handing him the vial.

"Drink this," he ordered.

Black looked at the vial with disinterest then took it and drank the contents. Snape took the vial back and settled back on his heels. After a few minutes, he grabbed Black's chin and raised his head.

"Black!" he said sharply. "Do you remember me?"

Sirius frowned and started shivering. His brow became furrowed and his breathing deepened. He stared at Severus and something seemed to spark in his eyes and he broke away from Snape's hold on his chin.

"Severus," he whispered then his eyes narrowed. "S...Snivellous," he said softly then moaned and held his head.

Triumph filled Snape's eyes. "The pain will pass, Black," he said calmly.

After a few minutes Black raised his head, his eyes full of wonder and some suspicion. "Where am I?" he asked hoarsely.

"In Malfoy Manor with your friend, Tom," Snape said snidely.

Sirius frowned until the memory came back to him then he swore quietly. He looked up sharply at Snape and grabbed his arm. "Harry!" he gasped. "What happened? Is he alright?"

Snape was about to make an acerbic reply when he recalled what had happened to Potter. Realising he couldn't tell Black that right now, he chose to answer the question he knew Black to actually be asking.

"He is fine," he said impatiently. "When has he not come back from one of his idiotic ventures completely alright?"

Sirius scowled at him. "Don't talk about him like that!" he snapped and then sighed. "I...Sorry, Severus. I...Thank you," he said grudgingly, realising that Snape had probably done a great deal for him.

Snape stared in surprise; that was, as far as could tell, genuine thanks.

"Your welcome," he replied brusquely as Sirius levered himself to his feet.

"So how do I get out of here?" Sirius asked as he stomped around the room, shaking his head from time to time. Memories kept welling up and trying to overwhelm him.

"You don't," Snape answered shortly as he too stood. "You are in the middle of Malfoy Manor and the Dark Lord...has plans for you. Getting out will be difficult at the best of times."

Sirius scowled at him. "What kind of plans?"

"He intends to use you to kill your godson," Snape replied bluntly.

Sirius stopped and stared at Snape in horror. "No!" he whispered and Snape became irritated.

"Obviously that will not happen," he snapped. "Do think for once in your life."

Sirius started and shook his head. "Sorry," he said absently.

"I must go. The Dark Lord will become suspicious if I stay too long," Snape said as he drew his robes around himself. "I trust you can act appropriately after I am gone."

Sirius looked at him and, as Snape's words sank in, his expression became somewhat uncomfortable and a touch forlorn.

"I've been locked in before," Sirius said quietly. "How long before I can get out of here?"

"I...I don't know," Snape said reluctantly as he realised that for someone who had spent twelve years in Azkaban, being locked up again would be sheer torture. Snape couldn't honestly say whether he was reluctant to let Black out or reluctant that he had to tell him to stay here. "This will obviously change things. Do not do anything to draw suspicion upon yourself. I will be back in a day or two. The Dark Lord wishes for me to gain your trust; his plan relies on it."

Sirius snorted, little of his usual manner coming back. "I think I'll be alright, Snape," he said with irritation.

Severus turned and was about to unlock the door when Sirius' voice, filled with emotion, stopped him.

"Severus, tell...tell Harry I'm okay and I...I'll be with him soon."

Snape nodded, removed the spells he had cast and opened the door, slipping quickly out and locking it again.

Sirius watched the door close and slumped back down on the bed. He gave a sour, barking laugh. He supposed there was some kind of irony in this; forced to rely on the person who probably hated him the most in the world in order to get out of here. A small voice in the back of his head said it would serve him right if Snape left him here to rot. Sirius scowled at the voice and lay down to wait as patiently as he could.

Chapter 23

Severus apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and stalked back up to the castle. He wasn't sure if he had done the right thing back in that room or not. He had surely increased the risk to both himself and Black but he couldn't tell whether he had done any good. The Dark Lord had greeted him on his return to the parlour and Snape had spun a story that had seemed to satisfy him. He had been ordered to come to Malfoy Manor every couple of days to continue 'gaining Black's trust' so he knew he had ample excuse to go into the room now.

When he walked into the castle he headed straight for the Headmaster's office. This was something Albus needed to know now. Even though it was just past midnight, he knew the Headmaster would still be awake and he was proven right when he knocked on the door. He walked in to find Dumbledore sitting by the fire, waiting for him.

"Severus," the Headmaster said warmly. "Sit down. Would you like some tea?"

Snape shook his head and sat down opposite Dumbledore. He looked down at his hands for a moment then looked back at the Headmaster.

"I gave Black a Memory Restoring Potion tonight," he began. "He remembers everything now, I think."

Dumbledore gazed seriously at Snape. "Do think that was wise?"

"Probably not, Albus," Snape sighed. "But I believe it was the best thing to do. The Dark Lord had gone a long way towards convincing Black he was a vicious murderer whose duty was to kill Potter. This was...not sitting well with Black."

Dumbledore looked at his Potions Master with a wise smile. "What do you propose we do now?"

Snape shook his head. "I do not know. But whatever plan you were developing must be brought forward. I do not trust Black's ability to dissemble in front of the Dark Lord. He is a Gryffindor and not suited to doing so. If the Dark Lord suspects that Black remembers anything, he will use Legilimency and all of our work will be undone."

"And your own life will be in jeopardy," the Headmaster said.

Snape waved that concern away dismissively. "Irrelevant. I...also have a message from Black for Potter."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "Well, that is good but I think I would wait before you give that message to him, Severus. He has his first Quidditch game tomorrow, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw. I think it would be best to wait until after the game."

Snape grunted and nodded his agreement. "Albus, we must bring our plans forward," he said urgently. "The Dark Lord wants to use Black against Potter. He plans on brainwashing Black into killing his godson. We cannot rely on Black holding out against the kind of vitriol the Dark Lord will use."

"I understand, Severus," Dumbledore said soothingly. "We will be as quick as we can but some things cannot be rushed."

Snape nodded uncomfortably, unsure as to whether Dumbledore truly understood what was at stake. He rose and nodded to the Headmaster.

"I must go, Albus," he said and left the office at Dumbledore's distracted nod.

He walked down to the dungeon, trying to come up with a plan. It was clear the Headmaster was distracted by something else. They could not rely on Black; his natural instinct was to protect his godson and the Dark Lord would inevitably say something that would cause him to react without thinking. They must get him out...and soon.

Harry and Ron stood at the entrance to the Quidditch stadium with the rest of the Gryffindor team behind them, waiting to be announced. With the graduation of Lee Jordan, Dean Thomas had taken over the

announcing and commentating duties. Despite his muggle upbringing he had done a fine job during practices and Madam Hooch had had no hesitation in giving him the job. Kirke and Sloper stood fidgeting behind them, brooms in one hand, bats resting on their shoulders. Ginny and the Creevey brothers stood behind the Beaters, waiting with outward calm. At a wave from Dean, they mounted their brooms and shot out onto the pitch. This was their first game of the season, against Ravenclaw, and both Ron and Harry were very nervous about how the team would go. They and the Ravenclaw team took their positions and Madam Hooch, who was refereeing the game, released the Golden Snitch. She then released the bludgers and finally the quaffle and the game was on!

Harry flew above the game, watching with one eye for the snitch and keeping his other eye on the players below. He had become accustomed to flying with Oversight by now, though the crowd did add an extra dimension to everything that he wasn't used to. He could see that Ginny and the Creeveys were working well together and also working well with the two Beaters. Ron was doing an outstanding job keeping and soon the score line stood 80 to 20 in favour of Gryffindor. The Ravenclaw Seeker was shadowing him and Harry grinned. That was no way to beat him. Ginny knew how; play your own game, watch for the snitch yourself and you might have chance of seeing it before he did. He flew a few more circuits of the pitch. The Ravenclaw chasers managed to pull themselves together and get a few past Ron. The score was soon 130 to 90 and Harry began seriously looking for the snitch.

He saw a flicker of purple in the middle of the pitch and instantly dove down towards it, the Ravenclaw Seeker hot on his tail. The snitch, almost seeming to realise it had been spotted, tore off down the pitch. Harry raced after it, his concentration absolute. He followed the snitch as it flew up beside the stands, losing the Ravenclaw Seeker for the moment. He flew upwards after the snitch alone, the Ravenclaw Seeker seemingly not having the stomach for such aerobatics. The snitch jinked left and right and he closed in on it. He was just about to

grab it when it shot downwards. He followed it, not hearing the oohs and ahhs from the crowd. As he headed straight down, he realised that he was going to be able to catch it but he was going to have to pull up almost immediately when he did so or he was going to plow himself. He put on a small spurt of speed and his outstretched hand closed around the snitch. He yanked hard on his broom and just barely managed to pull up before he hit the ground. There was a chorus of screams and shouts as he did this that slowly modulated into cheers as they realised he had the snitch in his hand.

"Gryffindor wins!" Dean shouted. "Harry Potter has caught the snitch. Gryffindor wins 310 to 120 from Ravenclaw!"

The rest of the Gryffindor team made a bee-line for their Seeker and swamped him with hugs and back slaps, though Ginny added a kiss. He and Ron grinned at each other. The team had performed above their expectations. Ravenclaw had a fairly settled team and, after only six weeks of training, their new team had managed to rattle the Ravens early and gain a decisive advantage. They knew they would have to do more work before they took on a team like Slytherin but this was a damn good start. The team trooped off to the rooms to get changed and headed back up to Gryffindor tower for the party.

Later that night, Harry and Ginny slipped away from the party and wandered around the castle, talking and laughing. They had spent much of their time together talking; about what had happened to them during their time at Hogwarts, about what they had done before Hogwarts and anything in between. Harry had been pleased to find out that Ginny wasn't really inclined to want Harry to rescue her

anymore. He was just thinking about finding an empty classroom and stopping the talking when the nearly ran into Professor Snape.

He glared down at them as they apologised then Harry saw one of his eyelids close briefly in what he swore was a...wink.

"Potter, my office!" Snape snarled and walked off towards the dungeons in a swirl of robes.

Ginny stared after him, incensed but calmed when Harry whispered into her ear.

"I think he wants to talk to me, Ginny. I think he...well, he winked at me."

He paused and then very delicately nibbled on her earlobe. He turned to head down to towards the dungeons, grinning smugly to himself at Ginny's expression. He had discovered that that was a most effective way of getting Ginny to stop talking. He was still grinning when he got to the door of the Potions classroom and stood outside for a moment to compose himself and wipe the grin off his face. He could only imagine what Snape would say if he walked in with that kind of look on his face. He opened the door and walked in.

"Yes, sir," he said flatly.

"Close the door, Potter, and sit down," snapped the Potions Master.

Harry obeyed and waited for Snape to finish what he was doing. As he watched, Snape wrote what Harry was sure were a few scathing words on an essay and put both the parchment and his quill aside.

"I gave your godfather a Memory Restoring Potion last night, Mr Potter," he said. "The...circumstances seemed to warrant it. He remembers everything."

Harry stared at Snape in disbelief for a moment then smiled broadly. "Thank you, sir!" he said jubilantly before something seemed to occur to him and he sobered. "Er, sir? Is that going to get you in trouble?"

"It may, if your godfather cannot act appropriately," Snape said and Harry grimaced.

Snape paused for a long moment. "Your...godfather asked me to give you a message," he said slowly. "He...said to tell you that he is okay and that he will be with you soon."

Harry beamed at Snape again as tears welled in his eyes. He ducked his head and tried to recover his composure. When he had he raised his head again.

"What's happening now, sir? How are you going to get him out?" Harry asked urgently. "Sirius won't be able to last for that long. He hates Vol...er, the Dark Lord. His temper will get the better of him sooner rather than later."

"It appears the Headmaster does have a plan but I do not know when it will go ahead."

Harry scowled. "I meant what I said about not waiting for long," he said angrily.

"Rush off on another half-baked rescue mission," Snape sneered. "After the success of the first one."

That cooled Harry off a bit though he did not step back from his statement. "Not half-baked, sir," he said firmly and then smiled grimly. "This time I'll take more than just my friends. I'll have to take them; they'd kill me if I didn't. No, this time I'll take Master Nhean and you with me, sir."

Snape was startled at Potter's almost cocky air. "And what makes you think I would go with you, Mr Potter, and not lock you up for the Headmaster to deal with?" he said archly.

Harry dropped the cocky air. "Because you're not happy with the delay and you want something done to get Sirius out of there as soon as possible," he said bluntly. "That's understandable, sir. Sirius...well, Sirius isn't exactly the most subtle person and if the Dark Lord starts

tossing out threats, eventually he isn't going to be able to help himself." Harry smiled fondly then sobered. "Then he'll be dead and you'll be dead."

Snape nodded. "Very good, Mr Potter. You seem to have gotten your brain working this year. I trust you will continue thinking."

Harry rolled his eyes. Severus Snape; master of the back-handed compliment. "Can I go now, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr Potter," Snape said with a smirk. "I must ask you to keep this information quiet. I...would prefer that you did not tell your friends about this. One misplaced word could be dangerous. I would not object to you telling Lupin, however."

Harry nodded and left the classroom; to all appearances sullen and angry but incredibly happy inside.

Harry and Snape waited. They continued their normal round of classes as they waited, impatiently, for the Headmaster to get his plan moving. Harry threw himself headlong into his training in an effort to relieve his nerves. He began to take large strides and after three weeks reached the point where Master Nhean refused to let him spar with any of his friends, saying he was too advanced for them. Snape became more and more waspish in his classes until even the Slytherins began to complain. He approached each trip to Malfoy

Manor with growing trepidation. Black was getting more and more frustrated with his situation and Snape was glad that he had not told him about Potter's blinding. That would undoubtedly have tipped the man over the edge. Black had told him that he was spending a great deal of time as Padfoot; apparently the dog was able to handle this better than the man.

Another week had stretched by and both Harry and Snape were close to breaking point. Remus was still calm but Harry suspected that that was only a front and the man was as tightly strung as he and Snape. He was walking back to the Gryffindor tower from his Saturday morning Potions lesson. He and Snape had spent the last couple of weeks being excruciatingly polite to each other in these lessons. They both knew that one irritated remark from either of them would trigger an outburst from both and they had come to like working with each other. There were still many points of contention hanging between them but they had found that by ignoring them they were able to work together well.

He was walking down a corridor, not paying much attention when he was grabbed and pinned to the wall with an arm across his throat. Hands grabbed his arms and pinned them against the wall as well, not allowing him to bring his cane and sword into play.

"What are you playing at?" he snarled at Malfoy as he tried to pull his arms out of the grips of Crabbe and Goyle.

Draco leaned forward with a malicious glint in his eyes. "My father has something of yours," he said. "He was going to keep it but it seems its getting inconvenient to do so."

Harry went very still and Draco leaned in until they were almost nose to nose. "Don't you want to know what it is, Potter?" he spat.

Harry relaxed some more and when he felt Crabbe and Goyle's grips loosen slightly, he suddenly let all his weight drop down. He dropped right out of their grasps, getting a hard knock on the chin as he got away from Draco. He rolled across the floor and let his momentum bring him to his feet. He half-drew his sword and glared at Draco.

"Not really, Malfoy," he said firmly. "I'm just not interested in what you have to say."

He deliberately turned his back on the blond Slytherin and stalked down the corridor. He could hardly believe his luck when there were no curses thrown at him and as soon as he turned the corner he took off at a run towards the tower. He flew up to the dorm, ignoring his friends' questions and grabbed his invisibility cloak. When he got back down, he gestured abruptly for his friends to follow him out of the tower. When they got to the corridor he threw the cloak around his shoulders and turned to face them.

"Go and find Luna, Master Nhean and Remus and wait for me in the Guild classroom," he ordered. "Don't ask any questions now. I'll answer them later. GO!"

His friends jumped at his shout and stared at him for a moment then ran off to do what he had asked. Harry covered himself fully with the cloak and headed down to the dungeon. He knocked on the door of the Potions classroom but got no answer so he headed down the

corridor to the portrait that guarded the Potion Master's rooms and hoped that he was in there. He knocked softly and was relieved when a very startled Snape opened the door.

He quickly brushed past with a whispered, "It's me, sir," and waited for Snape to close the door. As soon as that happened, he drew off the cloak.

"Sir, I'm sorry to barge in like this but...when did you last see Sirius?" he asked breathlessly.

Snape frowned at him. "Two days ago, Mr Potter. I was due to go tonight. Why?" he demanded.

"I think something's gone wrong," Harry said urgently. "I just got bailed up by Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was going on about his father having something of mine and that his father was going to keep it but that it had gotten inconvenient."

Snape's eyes narrowed as he recalled the conversation he had had with Lucius two days ago, just before he had left. The elder Malfoy had hinted that Black was getting difficult to handle and that he suspected that his memories were coming back. He had also said that if he could prove it, he would tell their master. Snape had no illusions about what the Dark Lord would do if he deemed Black to be useless. If Black was lucky he would die quickly. He scowled as he realised that there was no way of determining if Black was alright without going to Malfoy Manor and if things had gone wrong that was the worst possible place he could be.

He glared at Potter with frustration. "And just what exactly did you have in mind, Mr Potter?" he said acidly.

He was surprised when Potter looked hesitant. "Er, well, I was hoping you might have an idea, sir. Look, I don't know if Malfoy was telling the truth or just yanking my chain but can we really afford to take the risk. I was kind of hoping that you or Professor Dumbledore would have come up with something by now."

Snape grimaced. "I am afraid the Headmaster has been distracted by events at the Ministry. He felt that Black would be capable of holding out for a while longer and has placed the planning for his rescue on the backburner."

Harry looked furious. He and Dumbledore generally spoke once a week about what was going on as Harry was generally unable to attend Order meetings due to school. The Headmaster had not told him about this however. He took a deep breath and attempted to calm himself.

"Sir, we have to do something," Harry said urgently.

"I am aware of that," Snape snapped irritably. "I am thinking, Mr Potter."

Harry stood and waited, his hands gripping his cloak and cane tightly. He really wanted to rush off and get Sirius out of there now but he had learned his lesson from last year. Rushing into things just made the situation worse.

"I presume your friends will insist on coming along?" Snape said sourly.

"Yes, sir," Harry said firmly. "I sent them to find Luna, Master Nhean and Remus and I told them to wait in the Guild classroom. I'm sure Master Nhean will want to help and I don't think we could keep Remus out of this."

Snape eyed Harry with a little more respect. "At least you have applied some thought, however small, to this," he said grudgingly. "Very well, I believe I may know a way to do this. Put that cloak on. We cannot be seen together. Go to the classroom and wait for me."

Harry nodded and threw his cloak over his head. He wanted to ask Snape what he had in mind but wasn't game enough to risk the Potions Master becoming angry and stopping them. Though he supposed there probably was a much lesser chance of that happening this time; Snape's life was also in danger if Sirius was in trouble. He made his way as quickly as possible to the Guild classroom. He walked in and stripped off his cloak.

"What's going on?" Remus asked tightly.

"Malfoy bailed me up on my way back from my Potions lesson," Harry said tersely. "He implied that Sirius was in trouble. I went to see Professor Snape and he didn't exactly disagree with me. Dumbledore doesn't have a plan to get Sirius out yet but I think Professor Snape might have come up with something." Harry stared around the group, watching their energy colours flow and swirl and seeing the worried looks in the ghostly overlay. "Whatever Professor Snape's plan is, I'm going," he said bluntly.

"I'm coming with you," Remus said firmly and with a small smile. "I can see that trying to stop you would be pointless and I am your guardian. If I can't keep you out of trouble, I should at least go along to keep you as safe as possible. Besides, Sirius is my friend. I lost him once...no, twice. I don't intend to let that happen again."

Harry's friends immediately stepped forwards.

"Well, you know we're coming with you," Ron said. "We told you we're sticking by you, no matter what. Besides I think we proved last year that we can handle ourselves."

Master Nhean had been watching this with interest. "I think I will accompany you as well, Harry," he said calmly. "A Master must oversee the work of their apprentice." He looked at the students he had been training. "I think you five should get your swords. You may need them."

Ron and the others stared at Master Nhean in surprise. He had been very strict about their usage of their swords, not allowing them to use them except under his supervision. That he was allowing them to use

them in a situation where he may not be there to correct them indicated either his trust in them or his belief that the situation was desperate. They walked over to the chest where the swords were stored and Ron pulled them out and distributed them to the others. The five teens strapped their swords to their waists. They did not use a sword and wandless magic like Harry and Master Nhean. They used traditional swords and held their wands in their off hands. They had had to adjust to using their wands in their non-preferred hand but all had managed. They were just testing the feel of the swords again when Snape walked into the classroom, potion bag in hand. He looked around and just for a second a look of approval glowed in his eyes then he scowled.

"So I see you all intend being the idiotic Gryffindors that you are," he said sourly. Everyone in the room nodded determinedly, ignoring the Potion Master's tone.

"Very well. Then we will do this my way. Anybody who disagrees can stay here," he snapped. "We will floo through to my house. Lucius Malfoy's house is well-warded and his floo connection is restricted. You would not be able to floo in from here or any public floo hub but you will be able to come in from my house. The Dark Lord insists that all Death Eaters are able to get to each other easily in case of danger...and to ensure he has access to us at all times. I will then floo to Malfoy Manor, determine what is happening at Malfoy Manor and come and get you."

Harry raised a hand slightly. "Er, sir, sorry to interrupt but what do we do if you don't come and get us?"

Snape stared at Harry for a long moment, causing him to fidget nervously.

"Good point, Mr Potter," Snape conceded. "Very well, it should take no more than fifteen minutes for me to ascertain what is happening. If I have not contacted you after thirty minutes, floo in and do what you can. In light of that possibility, I will outline the plan here and now."

The others nodded and Snape walked over to the table. The others gathered around as he unrolled a piece of parchment. On the parchment was a hastily but accurately drawn map.

"This is a map of Malfoy Manor or at least as much of it as I know," Snape continued tersely. "You will floo in here, the formal parlour. Black is being held here." Snape pointed at a marked room some distance from the parlour. "Malfoy keeps no servants other than house elves but I believe both the Dark Lord and Wormtail are staying in the manor. There may be other Death Eaters there, particularly if Black has given himself away. Do not hesitate in your dealings with them." He glared around the table, lingering on the teenagers. "They certainly will not hesitate in their dealings with you. Go directly to Black's room, retrieve him and get out." Snape suddenly turned his full attention on Harry's five friends and fixed them with perhaps the worst glare they had ever received from him. "And you lot, do not, under any circumstances, leave Mr Potter's side," he snapped. "He is at the most danger in this entire ridiculous escapade. The Dark Lord wants him dead and any Death Eater presenting him with Potter will be richly rewarded, so they will be suitably motivated."

The faces of Harry's friends hardened and they nodded firmly. They shifted until they had formed a partial defensive perimeter around him. Master Nhean had begun training them a couple of weeks ago in concert work and had started with how to defend someone in a battle

situation. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna had been learning how to become a genuine Battle Guard and Harry had been learning how to work in unison with his Battle Guard, not against them. Master Nhean's eyes had lit up every time he worked with them on this; he had told them there had not been a true Battle Guard formed in nearly two hundred years. It was very difficult to find five people who could all subsume their individuality and work to a single purpose with no jockeying for position, with no one wanting to be the leader or the best. Harry's friends hadn't really struggled with this aspect, they had simply concentrated on the idea that they were there to protect Harry and that had made their concert work much easier.

Harry had found it a little more difficult. The idea of a Battle Guard involved the one being guarded not only learning to work with their Guard but also learning to allow themselves to be guarded; to allow the others to take some of the risks. Harry had struggled with this until his friends had made it clear to him that this was going to happen. After that he had not been happy but he had allowed them to guard him and had learned to work with them.

Master Nhean watched the movement of Ron and the others and nodded in approval. They had reacted exactly how they should. Ron and Ginny were now standing on either side of Harry, hands on the hilts of their swords and flicking their gazes around the room. Luna and Hermione had taken up their positions behind Harry and were now facing away from the table, their backs towards Harry. Neville was standing to one side of Ron, waiting to take up his Point position. Neville had surprised them all with his ability once the weapons came out. He was no better than any of the others when they were unarmed but with a sword in his hand he was by far the best. Not as good as Harry but not too far off his standard. The Point position in a Battle Guard was always taken by the best swordsman or woman. It was the most dangerous and when Harry had found this out, he had tried to talk Neville out of it. Neville had listened to him and had very calmly told him where to stick that idea. Harry had been rather taken aback; Neville had never spoken to anyone like that before. Neville

had then apologised and explained that if anybody had a right to be in this fight it was him. He could have been the subject of the prophecy and his parents had been permanently damaged by the Death Eaters. Harry had had no choice but to concede. Hermione and Ginny, the other two who had shown some skill, were spread out over the other two ranks, Ginny with her brother in the Flanking Guard and Hermione with Luna in the Rear Guard.

Remus and Snape watched their students with some surprise. While Remus had known about the new step they had taken in their training, this was the first time he had seen it in action and he was surprised by the professional attitude they were all displaying. Snape watched them and actually managed to relax somewhat. He too had noted the professional attitude and the Night Master's approval. He decided that perhaps, just perhaps, the students might be able to be relied upon to do more than just cause trouble and get in the way.

He nodded to himself and continued. "Lupin, Nhean, your responsibility will be to get Black and get him out. Do not stop for anything. Potter and the others at least appear competent; allow them to find out if they are."

"What about you, sir?" Harry asked.

"I will take care of myself, Mr Potter," Snape replied flatly. "I know the house better than any of you. If there is a problem I am more likely than you to be able to get out. Worry about your task."

"And what exactly is our task?" Harry said with a fair imitation of the Potions Masters acerbity.

Snape's lips twitched at the creditable imitation. "Your task, Mr Potter, and your friends' task is to get Lupin and Nhean to the room and get them back with Black to the parlour." Harry and his friends nodded. "Are you all clear on what you are to do?" Snape asked intently.

"What happened if Sirius isn't in the room?" Hermione asked.

"Then we are in trouble, Miss Granger," Snape replied dryly. "If that happens, we will have to search the house."

Grim looks crossed the faces of everyone in the room at that thought. Snape broke the mood by rolling up the parchment and handing it to Remus. He lit a fire in the fireplace in the classroom and pulled a bag of floo powder out of his robes.

"Now, go to my house and wait. Say Snape Manor," he ordered brusquely.

Remus shoved the parchment map into his robes and stepped forward and grabbed a handful of floo powder. He nodded to Snape and threw it into the fire saying "Snape Manor". He stepped into the green flames and disappeared. Nhean stepped forward and followed him through. Harry gestured for his friends to go through and waited until only he remained in the room with Snape. He then stepped forward and grabbed a handful of floo powder.

"Professor Snape? Be careful. For once I'd actually like to see you in fifteen minutes," Harry said with a grim smile.

Snape's lips twitched into an amused smirk. "For once I agree with you, Mr Potter. Now go."

Harry nodded and threw the handful of powder into the fire with a "Snape Manor." He stepped into the green flames and flooed to Snape's ancestral home.

Chapter 24

Snape stared after Potter for a moment and then shook his head briefly. He took a handful of the floo powder and tucked the bag back into his robes. He settled the strap of potion bag more securely on his shoulder and threw the powder in the fire, saying "Snape Manor". He stepped into the fire and then out of it into his home's formal parlour. He nodded to the others, grabbed another handful of floo powder and threw it into the fire, saying "Malfoy Manor". He stepped into the green flames and emerged into the Malfoy's formal parlour. He quickly looked around but the room was empty. He carefully opened the door and stepped out. The house seemed quiet and he stepped back into the parlour. He summoned a house elf, knowing that they had been told to obey his instructions within limits. One of the little creatures appeared with a pop and bowed low before him, waiting silently for its orders.

"Where is your master?" he asked firmly.

"Master is in the Basement Hall with the Dark Lord and Mr Wormtail, Professor Snape," the house elf informed him politely. "They has the Dark Lord's guest with them."

Snape gritted his teeth and dismissed the house elf. The Basement Hall was one of Lucius' pretensions. It was nothing more than a large room in the basement of Malfoy Manor that the Dark Lord had appropriated to use as a meeting room and torture chamber. That they were in there with 'the Dark Lord's guest' could only mean that Black had not been able to maintain the illusion of not remembering anything. Snape sighed; it was inevitable really, the Dark Lord was skilled at reading body language. This was however going to change everything.

He grabbed some powder from the jar on the mantelpiece and flooed back to his own house. He found everyone seated in his own formal parlour, waiting with a remarkable amount of restraint. A few jumped when he flooed in and Harry and Remus stood and looked eager.

"We have a problem," Snape said flatly before he could be questioned. "It appears Black was not able to keep up the charade." He shook his head and sighed. "Perhaps I should not have restored his memory," he said quietly and then looked up. "No matter. The Dark Lord has Black in a basement room with Lucius and Wormtail. Lupin, the map." Remus pulled the map out and opened it on a small table. The rest gathered around and Snape pointed at a room not too far from Sirius' prison. "It is this room here. We should be able to get there undetected. There appears to be no one else there. When we get to the room we will have to act fast to use the element of surprise. Lupin, Nhean and I will launch an attack at the Dark Lord, Lucius and Wormtail. Potter, you and your friends will get Black out of the room. It is possible that he will be injured. I ask that you exercise some thought and ignore any injuries he has and do not weep and wail over them. Just get him out any way you can," Snape ordered tersely. Harry and his friends nodded, ignoring the sarcastic remarks. "When you are out of the room, let us know and we will fall back and cover you. It is important that you keep going until you get to the parlour and floo straight to Hogwarts, preferably straight to the Headmaster's office. There will be no problems doing that; you are students of Hogwarts and Black is a member of the Order. The wards will not stop you. Do not wait for us. Do not try any ridiculous heroics if one of us should fall. Just get out!"

Harry and the others nodded and Remus folded the map and tucked it in his robes again. They quickly flooed into Malfoy Manor and stepped out of the fire into the parlour. Snape and Remus drew their wands while Harry and Master Nhean drew their swords, holding the

scabbards in their off hands. Harry's Battle Guard drew their swords and wands, each of them muttering the word "Scutumus" and producing from their wands an oblong-shaped shield. They quickly took their places around Harry and the three men stepped in front of them, with Snape in the lead.

He quickly led them through the empty corridors of the manor until he reached Black's prison. He placed his hand on each of the locks to unlock them and opened the door. Black was indeed not there and his face became grim. He shut the door again and led them down to Lucius' Basement Hall. He stopped outside the double doors and raised an eyebrow at them all. He got nods in return and raised his wand.

He pointed it at the doors and shouted, "Effringo!"

The effect was rather spectacular. The doors were blasted into the room, right off their hinges. Snape, Lupin and Nhean charged in right behind them and started throwing hexes at the men standing at the other end of the hall. Harry and his friends followed them in and ducked around to the side of the room. A quick glance showed them that Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy had reacted fairly quickly to the surprise assault and were sheltering behind two pillars at their end of the room. Wormtail had clearly not been as quick and he lay unconscious on the dais at that end of the room. Sirius lay curled up on the floor below the dais, also clearly unconscious. Voldemort and Lucius were completely absorbed in their fight with the three teachers, who had now also sheltered behind pillars. Harry gestured with a jerk of his head and the six students made their way along the wall until they got near the front dais. They ducked back into the shadows when Voldemort stepped out and threw three quick hexes at the teachers.

"So what I saw in Black's mind was indeed correct," Voldemort hissed menacingly. "My loyal Severus is not so loyal after all. How long have you been betraying me, Severus? You shall pay for that disloyalty with your life."

Snape's lips thinned and he threw a powerful hex at his former master. Voldemort deflected it with ease but did step back behind his pillar. Harry nodded to his friends. He tapped Neville on the shoulder and mimicked dragging something. Neville nodded and the two of them sheathed their swords. Harry held up three fingers and counted them down. As soon as he finished the count, they leapt out from where they were hidden and he and Neville each grabbed one of Sirius' arms. They dragged him back towards the wall as Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Luna maintained their positions but before they were halfway there, they were noticed by Lucius Malfoy.

"Master!" Lucius shouted. "It's Potter!"

Voldemort swirled around, a triumphant look in his eyes. "So, Potter, you dare to come near me without your protector. A foolish mistake from a foolish boy."

Voldemort raised his wand and Neville and Harry dropped Sirius' arms and drew their swords. Neville pushed Harry behind him and took up his Point position, producing the oblong shield once again. Voldemort raised a thin eyebrow in surprise.

"A Battle Guard, Potter?" he sneered. "Getting ideas above yourself? What does a boy like you need with a Battle Guard?"

Harry kept his mouth shut and raised his sword, bringing his scabbard hand around in case he needed to cast a spell. Voldemort raised his wand but before he could do anything a shout of "Stupefy" came from the three teachers. Voldemort was thrown backwards and Harry shoved his sword roughly back in its scabbard.

"Come on, Neville," he yelled. Neville gave Voldemort once last glance before cancelling his shield and sheathing his sword. He and Harry grabbed Sirius' arms again and continued dragging him out of the room. The rest of Harry's Battle Guard reorientated themselves to protect the two boys from anything that might get thrown their way but a quick glance showed them that Voldemort was not moving and Lucius was thoroughly occupied fending off the attacks of the three teachers. Harry paused and glanced up at where Voldemort lay and thought briefly about taking his sword and finishing the whole thing now. He was just about to let go of Sirius' arm when Lucius took advantage of a tiny lull in the battle and threw a hex in his direction. Ron saw it and pulled him down. The hex impacted with the pillar next to them and exploded, sending chunks of stone flying in all directions. All six students ducked, with Harry's Battle Guard throwing themselves on top of him. As soon as the explosion faded, they pulled themselves into a crouch.

"Forget it!" Ron shouted over the sounds of the fight, blood dripping from small wounds on his forehead and upper arm. "We've got to get out of here!"

Harry swallowed and nodded. He tightened his grip on Sirius and the six students ran as fast as they could for the door. As soon as they got through, Hermione cancelled her shield and threw red sparks in the direction of the teachers.

"We're clear," she yelled to them and put her shield up again.

The teachers started backing towards the door as Harry and the others started back up the corridor towards the parlour. Harry briefly considered levitating Sirius but decided against it. If he had to use magic against anyone he'd have to cancel the spell pretty quickly; this would probably be worse for Sirius than just dragging him along. They gritted their teeth and kept moving, not looking back and trusting that their teachers would be able to get away.

They charged into the parlour and came to a sudden stop when they saw Bellatrix Lestrange standing in front of the fire, brushing herself down. She had obviously just arrived. She looked up in surprise at their chaotic arrival and her eyes narrowed as she identified them. She snarled silently and pulled her wand, advancing on them. Harry and Neville did not hesitate. Without letting go of Sirius or even slowing down, Neville raised his wand and Harry raised his hand, which was clutching his cane.

"STUPEFY!" they yelled and Bellatrix was thrown backwards with the force of their combined curse. She impacted heavily with the wall beside the fireplace and slumped down to the floor, unconscious. There was a dent and blood left on the wall where she had hit.

Harry and the others ignored this. Ginny broke away from her position, grabbed the jar of floo powder and held it out. Harry and Neville were the first to reach her. Neville dropped his hold Sirius as Harry grabbed a handful of the powder and threw it into the fire. He shouted

"Headmaster's office, Hogwarts" and with the last of his strength hurled himself and Sirius into the green flames.

They tumbled out of the fire in the Headmaster's office and Harry quickly dragged Sirius clear. He turned back to face the fire, falling to his knees with exhaustion. He let one hand rest lightly on his godfather's shoulder. Dumbledore, who had been sitting at his desk, came over and asked a question which Harry ignored. Just then Neville stumbled through the fire, followed by Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Luna. The six students moved away from the fireplace, collapsed to the floor and waited, their hearts in their mouth. Finally the flames flared green and Remus, closely followed by Master Nhean and Snape staggered through and also collapsed to the floor.

"Albus! Close the floo to the outside!" Snape coughed and the Headmaster pulled his wand. He waved it at the fireplace with a muttered word to close the floo to the outside though he prudently left the internal floo network active. He turned and looked at the ten people lying in various states of exhaustion and injury on his office floor. He walked over to the fireplace and floo-called for the school's mediwitch.

He remained silent; his expression calm until Madam Pomfrey came rushing into the room. Then he walked over to her.

"Minor injuries and exhaustion only, Poppy," he said quietly and the mediwitch turned and knelt down next to Remus, who was closest.

The entrance of the mediwitch seemed to prompt Snape into action. He pulled himself to his feet and staggered over to where Sirius lay.

He shook the unconscious man until he moaned and his eyes flickered open.

"Prop him up," he said tersely to Harry who quickly slipped an arm behind his godfather's shoulder and pulled him slightly upright. Remus stumbled over, having been released by the mediwitch and helped Harry hold Sirius up. Remus had a bandage around his wrist and another on his neck but he grinned tiredly at Harry. Harry returned the grin as Snape pulled a potion bottle out of his bag.

"Counteragent for the Egeovenenum," he said, each word seeming to almost fall out of his mouth with weariness. Snape had what looked like very nasty burns on the side of his face and on his left hand and from the way he was leaning, he also had a wound of some description on the left side of his chest.

"Drink this," he said to Sirius and held the bottle to his mouth. Sirius obediently swallowed the potion and shuddered. Snape pulled out two more potions and poured them into Sirius. As he tried to move away, Sirius caught his wrist.

"Severus," he said hoarsely. "Thank you...and...I'm sorry."

Snape stared down at Black in surprise and finally nodded, his face a mix of conflicting emotions. Sirius let him go and slumped back against Harry and Remus. Madam Pomfrey came over and gave Harry a quick once over. He had managed to come out of this one pretty much unscathed. He was tired both from the stress of the battle and also from having to drag Sirius all the way to the parlour but otherwise unhurt. As soon as Madam Pomfrey was sure of this, she

turned her attention to Sirius. She ran her wand over him and her lips thinned. She glared at him but it quickly softened and she patted his hand. She got up and went over to inspect Severus. He submitted to her attentions with a tired glare and a muted snarl. After she finished with him, she stood up brushing her hand on her robes.

"Three to go to the hospital wing, Headmaster," she said briskly. "Professor Snape, Sirius Black and Mr Weasley. They should be able to make there under their own steam but I want everybody else in bed and resting." She turned to look at them sternly. "I don't know what you lot were doing and quite frankly I don't want to know. Probably something dangerous, knowing all of you."

Harry and Remus got up and pulled Sirius to his feet. When they got him to his feet, Dumbledore stepped over to them and tapped the three of them on the head. Harry felt the odd cracked-egg-on-the-head feel on the Disillusionment spell and smiled sheepishly at the Headmaster. He'd forgotten for a moment that Sirius was still considered by the rest of the wizarding world to be a wanted murderer. Hermione and Luna helped Ron to his feet and Neville and Ginny went over to Professor Snape and offered him a hand. Snape stared blankly at the two students for a moment then with a curious look on his face, accepted the helping hands.

They made an odd group walking down to the hospital wing and garnered many stares that made Harry quite glad for the Disillusionment spell. When they got to the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey hustled her three patients into beds at the far end of the room and drew a curtain around them. She then removed the Disillusionment spell from Sirius, Harry and Remus. She shooed Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville out of the room but, after a soft glance, allowed Harry and Remus to stay with Sirius. She walked over to Snape and began working on his burns.

Sirius smiled up at Remus and Harry, delight and astonishment in his face. This expression quickly faded when he looked closely at Harry. He had noticed the cane and had been confused by it, wondering why Harry was holding it but now he was starting to get worried. Although Harry could see in a unique way with his Oversight, he still had some of the habits of the blind due to the fact that the image overlay he saw was ghostly and he relied mostly on the energy fields. He had a tendency to stare in the direction of a person rather than directly at their face. He also tended not to notice emotion changes very quickly unless the person was talking and he could pick it up in their tone of voice. Sirius caught hold of Harry's free hand.

"Harry? Where are your glasses?" he asked, starting with the most glaring difference. Remus got a rather chagrined look on his face. He had over the last couple of months gotten used to Harry without his glasses. He moved around to stand beside Harry and placed an arm around his shoulders.

"Do you want me to tell him, Harry?" he asked softly to the confusion of Sirius. He was rather taken aback by Remus' almost paternal actions and he found a glimmer of jealousy rising within him.

Harry shook his head. "No, Remus, its okay," he said with an affectionate, if somewhat uncomfortable, grin at his guardian. "I guess it should come from me."

Sirius by this time was starting to panic a little. "What's going on?" he demanded, gripping Harry's hand tighter.

Harry sat down on the edge of the bed and Remus placed a hand on his shoulder. He took a deep breath.

"Sirius," he began, "there was...a problem...with the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon had a few problems and he kind of overreacted a little. He...he hit me and he sort of threw a glass at my face. It...well, it blinded me." Sirius gasped and his mouth dropped open in shock and horror. "Remus and Professor Snape rescued me and I've been here ever since. Professor Dumbledore found me a great teacher, Sirius." Harry's voice sped up and began to gain a little enthusiasm. "He's taught me a huge amount. And I don't ever have to go back to the Dursleys. Remus and Mr and Mrs Weasley are my guardians now."

Harry came to a sudden stop as Sirius gasped. Remus stepped forward and grabbed his oldest friend by the arm.

"Stop that, Padfoot," he demanded. "We weren't trying to replace you but we thought you were dead. Someone had to act as Harry's guardians after the Dursleys couldn't. Harry asked if I would be his guardian and since the Ministry wouldn't allow a werewolf to act as sole guardian, the Weasleys were the obvious choice. I'm sure Molly and Arthur wouldn't mind if you took over their role, just as long as you don't take Harry away from them. They do love him, you know."

Harry had been looking stricken ever since he had stopped talking and he suddenly threw himself at Sirius and hugged him tightly, tears rolling down his face. Sirius was startled at first and then wrapped his arms around his godson.

"Harry, it's alright," he murmured, tears welling in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I was being stupid. I forgot that I knew I was alive but you didn't."

Harry pulled back a little and wiped his eyes. "I wanted Remus to be my guardian because he was friends with my parents and you. He was all I had left of all of you and he helped me so much in the first couple of weeks after I was blinded. Sirius, I don't think I would have made it if it wasn't for Remus."

Sirius smiled at Harry and hugged him again. He then held his hand out to his friend.

"Thank you, Moony," he said earnestly. "Thank you for being there. Thank you for doing what I failed so miserably at. Reckon you could put up with the both of us?"

Harry grinned and turned to look at Remus. The werewolf looked at the two of them, both wearing almost identical expressions of entreaty. He started laughing.

"If Molly doesn't kill you for taking 'her Harry' away from her, I think I could manage it," he said wryly. "After all, someone's got to keep you two under control."

Harry and Sirius burst out laughing but were quickly hushed by an exasperated Madam Pomfrey. She left them with a warning about behaving themselves. Sirius grinned at her as she left and then sobered and turned back to Harry.

"So what's this about a new teacher?" he asked curiously.

Harry's face lit up and he launched into a detailed description of everything Master Nhean had done for him and taught him, finishing with the formation of his Battle Guard.

"A Battle Guard?" Sirius said with surprise. "I guess he knows about the prophecy then. Wow, there hasn't been a Battle Guard formed in hundreds of years."

"Two hundred, according to Master Nhean," Harry said. "It was kind of hard to get used at first. I really want to keep my friends out of danger but they kind of refused to listen to me. So I guess this is the best compromise. If I can't keep them safe, at least I know they've got the best training possible."

"Well, good on them for not listening," Sirius said emphatically and Harry smiled wryly. Sirius then turned to Remus. "So, Moony, what excuse do you have for hanging around Hogwarts?"

"I'm teaching, Sirius," he replied almost primly. "Defense Against the Dark Arts. Dumbledore arranged it. I believe it was something along the line of how terrible Harry's injury was and how it would be cruel and unkind to rob him of his guardian, nevermind that that guardian is a werewolf." Remus smiled mischievously.

Sirius laughed softly. "Good on Dumbledore then," he said then sighed. "I don't suppose he managed to clear my name?"

Remus shook his head. "He had trouble getting the Ministry to even admit that you were dead." He laughed ruefully. "Of course, I guess we can't do that now. Peter was knocked out when we went in to rescue you but we didn't have an opportunity to grab him as well as you."

Sirius chewed on that for a while. "What about me taking veritaserum?" he asked finally. "I never got a trial first time around. What about if we get Dumbledore to pressure for a trial using veritaserum?" He grimaced. "I've got to get my name cleared, Moony! I can't really be Harry's guardian until that happens."

Remus nodded; he could understand Sirius' urgency. "I'll speak with Albus," he said. "I'm sure we can sort out something."

Sirius nodded then grinned as he saw Harry stifle a yawn. "You two get out of here and get some sleep," he said gruffly. "You look like you need it."

Harry nodded and Remus threw an arm around his shoulders and led him out of the hospital wing. Sirius sighed and settled back in his bed. He looked around the little curtained off area and saw that both Ron and Severus were asleep. He grimaced; he really didn't know what to make of Severus Snape now. The man had risked his life for him. Sirius was very uncomfortable with this. He remembered the floo-call that Harry had made during the last school year. He'd been very

upset about the incident that had occurred after their Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL exam. Sirius shifted uncomfortably; that wasn't one of his best memories. Probably why I still have it, he thought. It had felt right at the time. Merlin knows Snape had given as good as he had gotten, though he'd been a lot more...Slytherin about it. His revenge had always been subtle and cunning. But as he'd gotten older he had come to the realisation that what he and James had done was...well, perhaps a little cruel.

Sirius shifted further down the bed and pulled the blankets up around his ears. He sighed and decided to think about this a bit later when he'd had time to consider what had happened a bit more. He was tired and sore. Voldemort had held the Cruciatus on him longer than he liked to think about. He'd passed out from the pain, in fact. He sighed again, shut his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

The next morning saw everyone back in the hospital wing with Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall. When everyone was settled either on a bed or in a chair, the Headmaster levelled a serious and even admonitory gaze on those who had ventured to Malfoy Manor the previous day.

"Now that you are all feeling better," he said sternly, "I think I'd like an explanation."

Harry beat the other adults to that explanation.

"I was the one who pushed for this, sir," he said firmly but with a hint of nervousness. "I was...intercepted by Draco Malfoy yesterday on my way back to Gryffindor Tower yesterday. He said something that made me think that Sirius was in danger. I went and got Ron and the others in Gryffindor and asked them to get Luna, Master Nhean and Remus. Then I went and spoke to Professor Snape. I asked him whether he thought what Malfoy had said was true or just Draco yanking my chain."

Dumbledore looked over at his Potions Master. "And your opinion, Severus?"

Snape steepled his fingers in front of his face. "I...took the threat seriously, Albus. It coincided with something Lucius had said to me that last time I had seen him."

"And why did none of you come to see me?" the Headmaster demanded.

Harry looked at Snape a little helplessly. Snape licked his lips. "You were distracted by what was happening at the Ministry, Albus," he said. "I felt that if Draco was motivated to goad Mr Potter in that way, we did not have the time to convince you that the threat was serious. I felt that we needed to move immediately."

"And you chose to follow Harry's plan?"

"Er, sir?" Harry interrupted. "It wasn't my plan. It was Professor Snape's." He shuddered. "The last we used one of my plans, it...well, it didn't work that well." Harry's voice shook. "That's why I asked Professor Snape, Master Nhean and Remus to help."

Dumbledore considered the three adults in question and then gestured for Harry to go on.

"Well, we met in the Guild classroom," Harry continued, wishing now that one of the adults would take this responsibility off him. "Professor Snape's plan was a good one. It used our strengths." Harry shrugged. "It probably also kind of helped that Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna have been training as my Battle Guard."

Albus and Minerva's eyes widened at this and Nhean smiled gently.

"I had intended to tell you, Albus," Nhean said with quiet amusement. "I wanted to wait for a while to ensure they would actually be able to function properly as a Battle Guard. As it turns out, they do. Their actions during our foray into Malfoy Manor were exemplary."

Harry's Battle Guard perked up and smiled proudly. Harry grinned at them and turned back to face the Headmaster.

"Sir, I know you're not happy that we kind of took matters into our own hands but we had to," he said earnestly. "Professor Snape and I both knew that Sirius wouldn't be able to hold out for long." He shot an apologetic glance at his godfather. "I'm sorry, Sirius, but when

Professor Snape told me what Vol...er, the Dark Lord was trying to do, I knew you wouldn't be able to stand it. He'd have said something vitriolic about me and you'd loose your temper."

Sirius gave a barking laugh. "No offense taken, Harry. You're right though I'm not entirely sure what I did to alert him. I tried to react properly and I thought I was doing okay." He scowled and scratched his head. "I guess I must have screwed up somewhere."

"It would not necessarily have been anything big," Snape said with an unreadable expression. "The Dark Lord is skilled at reading body language. If he saw anything the slightest bit amiss, he would then use Legilimancy to get to the truth of the matter."

Sirius gave Snape an odd look and then nodded. Everyone in the room looked at the two men, a bit surprised at the studied neutrality between them.

"Anyway," Harry continued, "that was why we had to act. If the Dark Lord did think that Sirius was lying and did use Legilimancy then he would also find out that it was Professor Snape who gave Sirius the potion to get his memory back and if he looked hard enough, he find out that Professor Snape was a traitor. And he did get that, sir. He...had a go at Professor Snape about betraying him during the fight."

Harry fell silent and Dumbledore considered what he had been told. While he was not happy that such precipitate action had been taken, he had to acknowledge that the action had been well taken.

"Very well," he said finally. "I am not pleased that you chose to take such an action without at least informing me of your intentions but I concede that the risk was necessary." He turned to look at Nhean with interest. "Was the Battle Guard truly that effective?"

"Yes, Albus," Nhean said with justifiable pride. "While I could not watch them all the time, what I saw of their approach to the end of the room where Sirius was lying was efficient and their rescue of him was tight and compact. I must especially commend Neville and Ron on their actions. The Battle Guard acted properly at all times and never once forgot their focus; to protect Harry. Harry is also to be commended. He struggled at first with the idea of letting his friends protect him but was able to work with his friends in the Guard instead of against them when things became serious."

The members of the Battle Guard raised their heads in pride at this praise. They had thought they had done well but to now be praised by the man who had taught them made all the difference. Now they knew they had done well.

Albus smiled gently at them. "Very well," he said. "Now what are we going to do with you, Sirius? Would you be willing to go back to Grimmauld Place?"

"No!" Sirius burst out, alarmed. He took a deep breath and calmed down. "No, Albus, I'm not going back to that...place." He paused a little uncertainly. "I...I want you to organise some kind of trial for me, Albus. I never got one the first time around and therefore never got to clear my name. I...I need to clear my name." He ran a hand through his shaggy hair. "Look, I'm eternally grateful to Molly and Arthur for

everything they've done for Harry but...I should be Harry's guardian. Along with Moony, of course. But the only way I can do that is if my name is cleared. I want a trial, Albus, with veritaserum so that nobody can doubt my word." He looked at Albus imploringly, silently begging him to understand, then something occurred to him. "And it better be Snape's veritaserum. I trust his, I don't trust the Ministry's."

There were surprised looks from many in the room at Sirius' last statement but the Headmaster appeared to ignore it. He nodded at Sirius.

"Of course, my boy," he said quietly. "I shall speak to Kingsley and we shall organise something for the next couple of days. In the meantime, I would like you to use Harry's excellent cloak to go to the suite you have shared with Remus and, though I know it will not be easy, to stay there."

Sirius' eyes closed and a forlorn, pained look crossed his face at the idea of being locked up again. He swallowed and slowly nodded his head. Albus smiled sympathetically at him.

"We will get this done quickly, Sirius. I promise," he said earnestly. He then turned his head to look at Snape.

"Severus, now that your role has been exposed, I must ask that you remain in the Hogwarts grounds until we can ascertain precisely how much danger you are in."

Snape scowled and nodded reluctantly.

The Headmaster stood and clapped his hands. "I think that is all for now," he said brightly. "Minerva, I think you and I need to speak with Kingsley. I shall let the rest of you head for whatever Sunday diversions you prefer." He then fixed them all with a stern gaze. "I trust if any of you have any further plans for gallivanting around, you will inform me?"

There were chagrined and sheepish nods from the others in the room and the Headmaster swept out, his deputy in his wake.

Chapter 25

An hour later, Harry, Remus and Sirius were ensconced in the suite. Remus had surprised them all by magically expanding the suite so that it now had three bedrooms, explaining that teachers had the ability to change their rooms to a limited extent. He had also explained to Sirius that Harry had kind of taken over his old room. Sirius had grinned at the two of them and had stuck his head into his new room and pronounced himself satisfied with Remus' work. Then the three of them settled down in the living room and Sirius demanded the full story of what had happened in his absence.

The next couple of hours were difficult for Sirius. Harry explained how upset he'd been after Sirius' apparent death and what had happened that led to his blinding. That part had been difficult for all three. Harry had then gone on to explain how Remus and Snape had helped him when he had first gotten to Hogwarts and what Master Nhead had done at first. When Harry described his little breakdown and Snape's role in helping him, Sirius could not contain himself.

"Snape?" he said incredulously. "He actually helped?"

Harry rolled his eyes and Remus chuckled.

"Yes, Padfoot," Remus said patiently, "he helped. He admitted a few nights before that that he had some experience in dealing with those sorts of breakdowns, though he didn't elaborate."

"But why didn't you help?" Sirius asked indignantly.

"Because it was the day after the full moon," Remus replied patiently. "Severus had run out of an ingredient for the Wolfsbane potion and wasn't able to get his hands on anymore in time. I had to go through...the...change without the potion and it seems that an unfortunate side effect of taking the Wolfsbane is that if you stop taking it, the change becomes...harder. I was in no condition to even be getting out of bed."

Sirius looked stricken at the thought of his friend suffering like that. "Moony, I...sorry, I didn't think," he stammered.

Remus smacked Sirius lightly on the side of the head. "Idiot," he said genially. "It wasn't anybody's fault so don't apologise. It was just an unfortunate set of circumstances."

Sirius grinned sheepishly and stuck his tongue out at Remus which caused Harry to collapse laughing. Sirius eyed his laughing godson curiously.

"Okay," he said slowly, "explain to me how you can be blind and yet still obviously see what's going on?"

Harry got his laughter under control and explained the concept of Oversight to Sirius. That led to him explaining about the Guild of the Night, his induction into the Guild and everything that Master Nhean had taught him since then; Harry didn't see the need to hide things

from his godfather. Sirius was left alternately shocked, astounded and confused.

"So this Oversight isn't really like real vision at all?" he said slowly after Harry had finished explaining. "If I understand right, you're seeing the magical energy fields that are in everything."

Harry nodded. "Yes, that's right. I do also see a kind of ghostly overlay of the real world but mostly I rely on the energy fields."

"And they have meanings, the energy fields you see?"

"Well, they indicate certain attributes that people have. It's not the be-all and end-all of the person but they do give a pretty good indicator of what a person is like," Harry said musingly. "And they can change if the person changes."

"So what are my energy fields like?" Sirius said hesitantly. "And what about Moony's?"

"Um, well, I see Remus' energy fields every day so I'll start with him," Harry said with a grin. "Remus is Dark Red, Scarlet and Light Brown, flecked with Light Green and with a Purple outline."

"So what does all that mean?" Sirius asked patiently.

"Well, each of the colours can stand for a number of different attributes but each person is unique," Harry explained in an academic tone. He had spent a great deal of time with Master Nhean examining energy fields and working out what they mean. "A person may only have one attribute of a colour or they may have all of them. For Remus, his Dark Red attributes are raw energy, anger and aggression, all tempered with wisdom and restraint. His Scarlet attributes are courage and loyalty. The Light Brown is a really odd colour that doesn't appear to often. It means that he has high aspirations that have been tainted by realistic doubts. The Light Green flecks indicate vitality and health and the Purple outline is one that all witches and wizards have; it means that they have innate magical ability."

Sirius was a little stunned by all of this. "Wow," he said finally. "That's a pretty good description of Moony, werewolf and all." He then stopped and grinned at Harry. "But you sound like a book, Harry."

Harry laughed. "I know. I...can't actually read anymore, even with the Oversight. I can't see the print but Hermione got a great present for my birthday. It reads the books to me. But for Oversight I pretty much had to learn everything by rote so I basically learnt the explanations for the colour attributes from Master Nhean. Whatever his wording was that's pretty much what I memorised."

Sirius laughed. "Good explanation! Now what about me?" he asked.

Harry looked carefully at his godfather. "Okay," he said slowly, "your energy colours are Scarlet, Red-Orange and Yellow." Harry frowned.

"You've also got some flecks of Murky Yellow, though those seem to be fading, and flecks of Black and the purple outline, of course."

"So what does all that mean?" Sirius asked, intrigued.

"Um, your Scarlet attributes are courage and loyalty and your Red-Orange attribute is pride. Your Yellow attributes are intelligence and wit." Harry paused as he considered Sirius' energy colours carefully. "The Murky Yellow flecks indicate ill-health and confusion but as I said, they seem to be fading. Er, the Black flecks indicate hatred, fear and uncertainty."

Sirius and Remus exchanged looks. "That's...not a bad summation," Sirius said a little shakily. He swallowed and tried to divert Harry and Remus' attention. "What about your friends? Are their energy colours as accurate as mine and Moony's?"

His diversion half-worked as Harry's face immediately lit up. Remus however stared at him for a long moment, the look in his eyes indicating they would talk about this later. Sirius nodded once to indicate he understood the message and turned his attention to his godson.

"Oh yeah, their energy colours are pretty accurate," Harry was saying. "They were as surprised as you were when I told them."

"I'll bet," Sirius said dryly. "Back to what's been happening, are you still doing any normal classes or just the training with Master Nhean?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'm doing Transfiguration, Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts. I'm also doing Potions." Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, they're kind of combined Potions and Occlumency lessons."

"With Snape," Sirius said flatly.

Harry sighed. "Yes, with Snape. He's been alright this year, Sirius. And anyway, I understand a few things a lot better now. He had to be mean to me. After all, it would have looked a bit strange if a supposedly loyal Death Eater didn't hate Harry Potter, wouldn't it?"

"That doesn't excuse some of the things he's said to you!" Sirius said indignantly.

"I know," Harry said with exasperation. "Sirius, it's alright. Snape and I have kind of, well, declared a truce. It was mostly him. I mean, he's still pretty sarcastic and snide but he's not nasty anymore. Well, not in our lessons anyway. He's been pretty normal in public but he had to be." Harry paused. "It was his plan that got you out, Sirius. Not mine, not Remus'."

Sirius grumbled under his breath for a few more moments then let the subject drop. Harry sighed with relief and then decided to ask the question that had been nagging at him for most of the night.

"What's Voldemort going to do now?" he asked bluntly. "I mean his original plan's gone but he's not going to leave me alone, is he?"

Sirius and Remus exchanged looks again. "No," said Remus reluctantly, "he won't and he'll be pretty angry as well. I think he'll be smart enough not to indulge in a knee-jerk reaction to this but he's going to try something. And we won't have any warning now that Severus has been uncovered as our spy." Sirius flinched and Remus sighed. "Stop that, Padfoot. It's not your fault. You did your best and you held out for far longer than any of us thought you would." Sirius scowled at that and Remus laughed. "Sorry but it's true."

Sirius continued scowling then sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I know, Moony. It was bloody hard to put up with some of the stuff he was saying and trying to act like I believed it." He sighed again and shook his head. Deciding that it was time to change the subject again, he fixed Harry with an amused look. "Now, what's this you said about some girl?"

Harry blushed and Remus roared with laughter.

"She's a red-head, Sirius," Remus said with sly amusement. "I saw them lying on the couch once together. I could have sworn it was James and Lily."

"Really?" Sirius said with interest as he watched his godson turn an even brighter shade of red. "Hmm, attraction to red-heads must run in the Potter genes, eh?" He grinned. "'Bout time you realised what a great catch Ginny Weasley is!"

Harry gaped at Sirius. "How...how did you know?" he stammered.

"Er, Harry," Sirius said slowly, "who else could it be? Besides, how many red-haired girls are there that you know?"

Harry shrugged and grinned shyly. "Well, yes, it's Ginny. We're kind of taking things slowly but I really like her."

Sirius and Remus grinned at each other, remembering a similar conversation with a similar-looking boy so many years ago. Sirius then winked at his friend and dove into teasing Harry. When he stopped he eyed the odd necklace Harry was wearing.

"What's that around your neck?" he asked curiously.

"Oh!" Harry exclaimed and unwound Orinda from his neck. "Hagrid gave him to me. He's a Runespoor and his name is Orinda." He held the Runespoor, who was now considerably larger than when he first got him, and allowed Sirius to look at him. As he did so, Orinda was examining him with equal interest.

"Who is this?" the left head hissed.

"My godfather," Harry hissed in reply.

The Runespoor hissed contentedly. Sirius shook his head with amusement.

"Trust Hagrid," he said, smiling at Harry.

Three days later, Harry, Sirius and Remus were waiting in the Headmaster's office. It was early evening and they were waiting for the arrival of a contingent of Ministry officials. Dumbledore and Kingsley Shacklebolt had been able to arrange for Sirius' trial to occur at Hogwarts. None of the three waiting knew how he'd managed that but they were grateful for it. All three were nervous; Sirius was pacing up and down, his face closed and tight; Harry was sitting on the couch, fidgeting with his cane and Remus was leaning against the mantelpiece, outwardly calm but the tension in his shoulders giving away his own nervousness. All three jumped and whirled to face the door when it opened but relaxed when they realised that it was simply the Potions Master arriving. Sirius nodded tightly to Snape and continued his pacing. Severus eyed the three of them with a raised eyebrow then took a seat across from Harry.

The room had been carefully set up early in the day by the Headmaster. Sirius would be seated in a chair in front of the Headmaster's desk, facing the others in the room. Remus and Harry would take the couch which had been placed to one side of the room. The Ministry officials and Professor Snape would take the remaining chairs. Two Aurors would flank Sirius until he was declared innocent.

A few minutes later they heard the sounds of people coming up the stairs. Remus left his position by the mantelpiece and joined Harry on the couch, placing one hand on his shoulder. Sirius looked up, an expression of worry and dread settling on his face. He turned to look at Harry and Remus and smiled weakly. He then went and sat down in his assigned seat.

The door opened and Dumbledore walked in with Kingsley Shacklebolt beside him. Behind him was Tonks, who gave quick wink to Harry, and behind her were a dozen members of the Wizengamot. Dumbledore had kept the press numbers to the minimum and the sole representative of the press was Rita Skeeter. The Headmaster gestured for his guests to take their seats and Kingsley and Tonks moved to the front of the room and took their positions on either side of Sirius. The members of the Wizengamot sat down and Rita pulled out her quill. When everyone was ready, Kingsley stepped forward.

"This is the trial of Sirius Black," he said in his deep voice. "This is an official trial to be held using veritaserum at the request of the accused. The members of the Wizengamot present here today will be required to render a verdict at the end of the hearing. This verdict will be final." He turned his head to look at Snape. "Professor Snape, I believe you are providing the veritaserum for today's trial."

Snape stood and nodded. He pulled a small vial containing a clear potion out of his robes and handed it to Kingsley. The tall Auror pulled a piece of test parchment out of his robes and tested the contents of the vial. He then showed the test parchment to the members of the Wizengamot to allow them to verify that the potion was indeed veritaserum. When that had been done, he handed the test parchment to Tonks and faced the audience again.

"Once the veritaserum has been administered, I will be the only one permitted to ask the accused questions. Anyone else attempting to ask questions will be removed from the room." His gaze rested on Rita for a moment. He turned and gestured for Sirius to open his mouth. Sirius swallowed once, shuddered and obeyed. Kingsley allowed three drops of the veritaserum to fall into Sirius' mouth then stepped back, handed the vial to Tonks and waited for a few minutes.

When he was sure that the veritaserum had taken effect, he began.
"What is your name?"

"Sirius Black."

"Who was the Secret Keeper for the Fidelius spell protecting James, Lily and Harry Potter?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

There were surprised looks and murmurs from many in the audience. Kingsley shot them a quelling glance and continued.

"Who was originally meant to be the Secret Keeper?"

"I was."

"Why did you change?"

"It was my idea. I thought it would be obvious that I would be James' Secret Keeper. I suggested to James that we change it to Peter. Nobody would think that we would trust him with something like that. It would be perfect. We could hide him away safely and then I could parade around in public. If Voldemort grabbed me, it wouldn't matter. I wouldn't be able to tell him anything."

"Did James go along with this?"

"Yes, he thought it was a good idea."

"Why use Peter and not Remus Lupin?"

Sirius shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "We knew that the traitor was someone close to James and Lily. Neither James nor I thought Peter would have the stones to do something like that. And we had heard that Voldemort was approaching some werewolves." He gave a barking, bitter laugh. "It was Peter who told us that; said he'd heard someone muttering about it in Diagon Alley. We thought that there was a possibility that Remus was the traitor." He shot a glance at Remus, who smiled in understanding.

"What happened on that Halloween night?" Kingsley asked and the members of the Wizengamot leaned forward slightly.

"I went to check on Peter that night and found the house was empty. Peter shouldn't have left and I got a very nasty suspicion. I got to Godric's Hollow where James, Lily and Harry were hiding but I was too late." Tears began to trickle down Sirius' face. "The house was in ruins. I looked around and found the bodies of James and Lily and then I found Harry. He was alive, I didn't know that was possible, but he was alive and crying. I was about to leave with him when Rubeus Hagrid showed up. He said Dumbledore had sent him to get Harry. I thought it was a perfect opportunity. I knew by then that it was Peter who was the traitor. He was the only one who could have led Voldemort to Godric's Hollow. I thought that I would let Hagrid take Harry to Dumbledore and go after Peter. I could come back later and get Harry. Peter didn't know that I had put a light tracking spell on him so that I always knew where he was. I told Hagrid to take my bike and tracked down Peter. I...don't know now what I was going to do with him when I found him. I was pretty angry. But he got in before me. I tracked him down to a street in muggle London. Before I could say anything, he yelled out something about me betraying James and Lily. I noticed that his hand was bleeding and realised that he had cut his own finger off. I was pretty stunned by that and what he had yelled out and he took advantage of that. He yelled out some kind of curse and the street exploded, knocking me out. When I came round, the place was full of Aurors. They had already spoken to the witnesses who survived and thought I had killed James and Lily and caused that explosion." Sirius' face filled with disbelief and anger. "I didn't know what to do or say and I felt pretty hysterical. I just started laughing." His mouth twisted with bitterness. "Peter sure got me."

The audience were staring at Sirius with horror and there was also shame on some faces. Kingsley eyes were full of compassion.

"To confirm, you were not the Potter's Secret Keeper?"

"No."

"You did not betray James and Lily Potter?"

"No!" Sirius half-shouted. "I would never have betrayed them!"

"Peter Pettigrew was the Potter's Secret Keeper?"

"Yes," Sirius snarled.

"Why did you escape from Azkaban?"

"Because I realised that Peter was still alive. I never knew whether he survived that blast but the Minister was there one day and he left me his paper. On the front was a photo of a family and on the shoulder of one of the boys was a rat. I knew that rat. I'd seen him a thousand times. It was Peter. The article said the boy was at Hogwarts. I had to escape. I had to protect my godson."

"Peter Pettigrew is an animagus?"

"Yes, a rat."

"But he is not registered?"

"No."

"Are you an animagus?"

Sirius gave wry smile. "Yes."

"But you are also not registered?"

"No, I'm not registered."

"Why are neither of you registered?" Kingsley asked sternly.

"We thought we might get into trouble or that we might get Dumbledore into trouble."

"Why?"

"We, along with James, became animagi at school. We finally managed the transformation in our fifth year."

"And why did you try to become animagi?"

"Because our friend, Remus Lupin, is a werewolf. We found out about it and wanted to do something to help. James found out that a werewolf is only a threat to humans so we decided to try to become animagi so that Remus wouldn't have to be alone when he transformed. If we could become animals, he wouldn't be a threat."

"You did this even though there was considerable danger to it?"

"Yes! Remus was our friend and we weren't going to let him go through that alone."

There were approving looks from many of those in the audience. Kingsley turned back to Sirius with a tiny smile drifting across his lips.

"I trust you will register yourself at the first opportunity?" he asked dryly.

Sirius grinned. "Yes." He then shook his head and blinked a few times. Kingsley, recognising that the veritaserum was wearing off,

patted him on the shoulder and turned to face the members of the Wizengamot again.

"I think that is all we really need to know," he said. "I would ask the members of the Wizengamot to render their verdict on the accused."

An elderly, wizened little man stood up. "Oh, get on with it, Shackbolt," he wheezed. "I think you've proven your point that the man is innocent. What I want to know is why this wasn't picked up years ago? I understand that Black wasn't given a trial when he was arrested. How did that happen? And what's going to be done about this Pettigrew?"

Kingsley looked around at the other members of the Wizengamot, who all indicated their agreement with the verdict and the questions.

"Good," the tall Auror said with satisfaction. "I will see that the paperwork is completed and filed." He levelled his gaze at Rita. "I trust the press will report this trial accurately?" Rita looked up and nodded then went back to writing enthusiastically. "I think we should take those very pertinent questions back to the Ministry, sir, though I understand that Bartemius Crouch Senior was responsible for that decision. This trial is over."

The members of the Wizengamot rose to their feet and began to leave the office, the Headmaster and Professor Snape accompanying them. Kingsley watched them go and turned back to Sirius.

"It'll take about a week to clear everything through the Ministry, Sirius, but after that you will be a free man," he said calmly.

Sirius rose to his feet, tears in his eyes. "Thank you, Kingsley," he said with feeling as he shook the tall Auror's hand "You don't know what this means to me." He went over to where Harry and Remus were now standing and hugged them both.

Rita Skeeter sidled up to them. "Well, Harry, Sirius, any comments to make?"

Harry looked at the sharp-eyed reporter with some suspicion. "Just that I'm glad Sirius' name has been cleared."

"And what now for you? I understand that Sirius is your godfather but that Mr Lupin and Mr and Mrs Weasley are your guardians. Anything to say about what should happen there?" she pressed.

"No," Harry said bluntly. "What happens is our business and will be sorted out by us."

Rita eyed the three and glumly concluded that she wasn't likely to get anymore out of them. She made a beeline for the two Aurors. Harry, Sirius and Remus watched her go and then watched with amusement as Kingsley and Tonks deftly ushered her out of the room while appearing to answer her questions.

Remus looked at his friend. "Well, Padfoot, how does it feel to be a free man?"

Sirius' face lit up and he looked about ten years younger. "It's a relief, Moony. A hell of a relief." He grinned mischievously. "Hey, I don't suppose you know what Hagrid did with my bike, do you?"

Remus looked alarmed. "Hell, Padfoot, with any luck he got rid of it!"

Sirius looked hurt. "Moony! How could you say something like that?" He mock-pouted. "That bike is a gem!"

"That bike is a menace!" Remus countered.

"Moony, my old friend," Sirius said as he slung one arm around Remus and the other around Harry and steered them towards the door, "you are going to give Harry the wrong impression. You're going to make him think that there is something wrong with my bike. You're going to make him think that it's dangerous or some other kind of rubbish. That bike is a work of art and it is a chick magnet. You just don't appreciate that."

Remus eyed Sirius with apprehension. "I appreciate that you nearly got me killed on that bike. I can't believe you talked me into riding with you. You were drunk!"

Harry laughed as Sirius sputtered. "I was not drunk, Moony. I had had a couple of celebratory ales. I was not drunk. And I believe I told you that you had to work with me when you were riding. You've just got to learn to relax!"

They walked out of the door with Harry laughing and Remus poking Sirius indignantly in the ribs.

Chapter 26

Voldemort paced up and down the room, passing the spot where Lucius Malfoy, Wormtail and Bellatrix Lestrange were kneeling with each trip. His eyes were fairly glowing red with rage and his hand was clenching his wand tightly. In the two weeks since the successful rescue of Black, his temper had barely faded. He got back to the top of the line he was pacing and whirled to face the three kneeling Death Eaters.

"How is it that none of you knew that Severus was a spy?" he hissed menacingly. There was no answer and his eyes narrowed. He raised his wand. "Crucio" he intoned and watched as the three writhed on the floor in pain. He held the spell for five long minutes before lifting it.

"Look at me, Lucius," he demanded and Lucius crawled back to his knees and raised his trembling head to face his master.

"Legilimens," Voldemort said and ripped through Lucius' mind. He left no corner untouched and at the end of it was finally sure of the loyalty of the elder Malfoy. He let him go and watched dispassionately as he collapsed to the ground again, this time unconscious.

"Look at me, Wormtail," he said. Pettigrew shivered and tried to raise his head but his fear got the better of him and he curled into himself and whimpered.

"Look at me!" Voldemort demanded. Wormtail again refused and the Dark Lord walked over and grabbed his chin and forced the rat-like man's head up.

"Legilimens!" Again Voldemort pillaged his follower's mind until he was sure that the man was loyal. He then withdrew and watched with contempt as Wormtail passed out. He then walked over to Bellatrix.

"Look at me, Bella," he said and she raised her head proudly, her eyes the clearest indicator of her growing insanity.

"Legilimens," Voldemort said for the third time and plunged into her mind. He almost flinched at the tangles and snarls that her growing madness caused in her mind but ploughed on until he was sure that she too was loyal. She slumped to the ground when he was finished, barely maintaining consciousness.

He sneered at the three Death Eaters lying on the floor, though he was satisfied that they were at least loyal to him. He started pacing again and snarled silently. He did not want to go through this for every one of his Death Eaters. He glared at the wall in front of him and made a decision. He was sure of the loyalty of these three and they would be the only ones allowed near him from now on. All of his orders would go through one of them. His thin lips curved in a satisfied smile; yes, that would work.

Voldemort now turned his thoughts towards Potter and his disloyal Severus. Both would need to be taken care of. He put Potter aside for now; he would have to think about that one carefully but Severus was a different matter. He strode over to Lucius and gave him a swift kick.

Lucius groaned and his eyes fluttered open. Seeing his master standing above him glowering, he pulled himself to his knees.

"Yes, Master," he grovelled. "I am your servant."

"Yes, you are, Lucius," Voldemort growled, "and now you will have the opportunity to prove it. You and your son. Bring Draco before me, Lucius. He shall take the Mark and shall have the chance to redeem your name in my eyes."

"It shall be as you say, Master," Lucius said and touched his forehead to the floor.

Harry and his friends trooped back up towards the castle. They were returning from a trip to Hogsmeade with Sirius and were in high spirits. Sirius was probably the most cheerful of them all. He had received all of the official paperwork regarding his full and absolute pardon a little over a week ago. He had immediately set out for Diagon Alley with Remus in hot pursuit, those papers in his hand. They had returned shortly after dark both roaring with laughter. Remus reported to Harry and his friends that Sirius had hit Diagon Alley like a tidal wave. Gringotts had been his first stop and Remus had arrived just in time to stop Sirius from trying to use wandless magic to hex the poor goblin who didn't realise that he had been cleared and who had been trying to call for the Aurors. Remus had showed the papers to the goblin, who had then assuaged Sirius' temper with his profuse apologies. Once he had had an opportunity to get some money, Sirius had attacked Diagon Alley with ! a determined look. Remus

had been hard-pressed to keep up. Sirius' first stop had been Ollivanders where he had replaced the wand that had been broken on his incarceration into Azkaban. He had then headed for Madam Malkins and after that out into muggle London. He had returned with his hair cut and dressed in jeans, t-shirt, leather jacket and boots and had attracted the gaze of more than one of the female students when he strolled into the Great Hall. He had plunked himself down at the Gryffindor table next to Harry and watched with amusement as a very frazzled Remus had walked into the Hall. Remus had eyed his friend and shaken his head in amused exasperation. Harry had found the whole thing very funny.

Sirius has settled down a little in the last couple of days and he and Remus had gone to see Molly and Arthur about Harry. They had returned looking both a little stunned and happy. Molly and Arthur had agreed, a little reluctantly, to surrender their guardianship to Sirius. Remus had told Harry later that Molly had given Sirius quite a lecture on appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and had demanded that Harry be allowed to come and stay with them whenever he wanted. Sirius had apparently been amused at the lecture and had agreed immediately to Molly's demand. Professor Dumbledore had organised the paperwork for Sirius to fill in and had sent it off to the Ministry. When the trip to Hogsmeade had been mentioned Sirius had decided to accompany them, eager to take his mind off the paperwork. Sirius had spent most of the trip telling them extremely funny stories about trips the Marauders had made to Hogsmeade. Harry, Ron, Neville and Ginny had spent most of the trip chok! ing with laughter while Hermione had been torn between laughter and disapproval until Sirius had told her one particular story about one of their seventh year trips. Not even she had been immune to the humour in that one. Luna had been seemingly unaffected by the stories apart from remarking on how funny they were but none of her friends seemed that concerned. They knew Luna quite well by now and knew she would probably start laughing uproariously at some later point.

They were walking through the Entrance Hall, laughing when they walked past Draco Malfoy and a number of other Slytherins. Draco glared at Sirius and then at the rest of them, Sirius smiled and waved cheerily back. Harry and his friends burst out laughing and hustled Sirius through the Entrance Hall and up to the suite he shared with Remus. When they got there, they all collapsed on various chairs, couches and cushions and poked fun at Sirius; all except for Hermione who was watching Harry with a faraway expression.

"Harry," she said finally, "has your scar hurt at all since we rescued Sirius?"

That question stopped all of the laughing and Harry turned to her in surprise. "Um, no," he said.

Hermione gave him a concerned look. "Harry," she said slowly, "that doesn't strike you as just a bit odd? Voldemort must be furious. Why haven't you felt anything?"

Harry froze as he realised that Hermione was right. Voldemort almost certainly would have taken his anger out on someone. He should have been in agony the last couple of weeks. He frowned and thought for a moment.

"Come to think of it," he said as the others watched with concern, "I haven't felt or seen anything since the night that Voldemort pulled Sirius out of the Veil; when he used those crystals." He paused and bit his bottom lip. "I think I'd better go and speak to Professor Snape."

"How have your Occlumency lessons been going?" Hermione asked as Harry got up of the cushion he had been lounging on.

"Pretty well, actually," Harry replied. "I can keep Professor Snape out completely now and he's been letting me try some Legilimancy. We've talked a bit about using it against Voldemort the way he has against me but he wouldn't let me do anything just yet. He wants me to be a bit better at Legilimancy before I do that."

"I'm coming with you," Sirius said suddenly and leapt to his feet.

Harry turned to face his godfather, an expression of misgiving on his face. "Er, Sirius," he said hesitantly.

Sirius rolled his eyes and sighed. "Harry," he said patiently, "I'm not going to insult him or hex him or do anything to him. I just want to know what's happening. I'm your godfather and your guardian. I'm supposed to look out for you and I'm going to. You're just going to have to get used to it."

Harry blinked and then smiled brilliantly at Sirius. "Okay," he said a little unsteadily.

Sirius grinned back and threw an arm around his shoulders. "Come on then," he said ironically. "Let's go and beard the lion in his den."

Harry elbowed Sirius in the ribs and they made their way out of the room. As they wandered down to the dungeons, Harry looked up at his godfather with concern.

"Now, you're not going to goad him, are you?" he asked worriedly. "I mean, he and I have been sort of getting along this year and I don't want you to ruin it."

"I'll be a good boy, mother," Sirius said dryly. "Don't worry; I just want to hear what he says."

Harry nodded dubiously and knocked on the door of the potions classroom. They heard footsteps in the room and the door was opened by Snape. He eyed them suspiciously.

"Yes, Mr Potter, Black?" he said tightly.

"Er, sir, can I talk to you about my scar?" Harry asked.

Snape raised an eyebrow and stepped away from the door allowing them in. Harry went and sat down in one of the chairs at the front table. Sirius followed him but leaned against the table instead. Snape returned to his desk at the front of the classroom and looked at Harry.

"Well, Mr Potter?" he asked with hint of impatience.

"Hermione just brought something up that I was hoping you might have an answer to," Harry began. "My scar hasn't hurt at all in the last couple of weeks which when you consider what has happened is a little odd."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "When was the last time you felt or saw anything?" he asked.

"Erm, the night that Voldemort pulled Sirius out of the Veil," Harry said.

Snape leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers. "When the Dark Lord used that odd crystal magic," he mused. He then turned his gaze back to Harry. "And you have felt nothing in the last two weeks?"

Harry shook his head and Snape stood. "Wait here," he ordered and walked into his office.

"What, a 'please' too much for you," Sirius muttered at the Potions Masters retreating back.

"Sirius!" Harry said warningly and Sirius settled back against the desk, looking disgruntled.

A few minutes later, Snape came back into the room, a small black leather-bound book in his hand. "The Headmaster and I have been trying to determine what kind of magic the Dark Lord used that night," Snape said absently as he paged through the book. "Magic using crystals is not generally known in the wizarding world as it is difficult to do. In order to channel magic through a crystal it must be perfect, not a single flaw, and not every kind of crystal can be used. Usually only one or maybe two types of crystal can be used by an individual witch or wizard."

He stopped and tapped the page in front of him decisively. "That, Mr Potter, is what I believe was done." He handed the book to Sirius who went and sat down next to Harry.

"Crystals can be used to enhance magic beyond what can normally be done," Sirius read to Harry. "It is possible for a powerful enough witch or wizard, using an unflawed crystal to which they are completely attuned, to even cast spells with permanent effects." Sirius looked up at Snape. "So he used the crystal to make his shielding permanent?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, I believe so."

"Can he remove that shielding?" Harry asked. "And could I still break through it?"

"I do not know the answer to either of those questions, Mr Potter," Snape said. "I believe he could possibly reverse the shielding, though

I suspect he would have to channel his magic through a crystal again. As we do not know what kind of crystal he used, it is impossible to tell how easy it would be to obtain another unflawed crystal of the same type. As to your second question, I do not know, though if you are willing, we could try."

"What!" Sirius burst out. "What are you trying to do to him? Get him killed?"

"I am trying to contribute to the downfall of the Dark Lord, Black," Snape sneered. "What precisely is your task in all of this? To act the fool as you have done for the last week?"

Sirius was about to answer in kind when Harry gripped his arm firmly. "Sirius!" he said sharply. "You're not helping and I believe I asked the question about going after Voldemort's mind. Professor Snape did not suggest it." Snape flinched at the name and Sirius stared long and hard at his godson.

"Harry," Sirius said hesitantly, "it could be bloody dangerous. What if he catches you in there? He's a powerful legilimancer. I've felt him do it! You could get hurt or killed!"

"And how would that change anything, Sirius?" Harry said dryly. "People have been trying to kill me ever since I started at Hogwarts." Harry began to tick things off on his fingers. "First year, Professor Quirrell. Second year, the whole Chamber of Secrets/Basilisk thing. Third year, well, third year as it turned out no one was actually trying to kill me but everyone thought you were after me and I suppose you could throw in Remus' transformation as a possibility there. Fourth

year, the Triwizard Tournament. The fake Moody spent the whole year rigging the contest so I would win, be taken to the graveyard to resurrect Voldemort and then get killed by him. Fifth year, well, fifth year was pretty much death-threat-free unless you count the trip to the Ministry or the time Professor Snape wanted to rip my heart out and feed it to me but, well, that last one was understandable. It's starting to not feel like a normal year unless someone tries to kill me at some point."

Harry's voice was full of something akin to exasperated humour by the end of his little rant and both Sirius and Snape were staring at him in astonishment. Then Sirius frowned.

"Snape wanted to kill you?" he growled.

Harry blushed. "Er, yeah, but I think he was a bit justified. That was after the...pensieve thing," Harry stammered.

"Still proud of your father?" Snape snarled; he had not wanted to be reminded of that.

"I don't know, sir," Harry said almost defiantly. "I don't know a lot about him. I'm proud of what he did to fight Vol...er, the Dark Lord. But I think he was a prat and a bully at school. I know what its like to be on the receiving end of that kind of behaviour, sir. I never had a friend until I met Ron on the train, my cousin Dudley made sure of that, when he wasn't pushing me around, that is. I wasn't spoiled as a child, sir, and I didn't have everything given to me. In fact, I hardly had anything given to me. I'm not my father."

Once again Sirius and Snape were left staring at Harry in astonishment. Sirius' expression soon faded into sadness. Snape stared at him for a moment longer before nodding.

"I have become aware of that, Mr Potter," he said in a neutral tone.

Sirius ducked his head, finally realising that this was what had upset Harry so much during the last school year. He had been bullied and had naturally been upset to find out that his own father and godfather had often acted like bullies themselves. Remus had been at him for some time during the period when he had been hiding out to apologise but he had stubbornly refused to admit that he had made mistakes. He sighed quietly and looked up at Snape.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I'm sorry we treated you like that. I'm sorry I sent you off down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack that night. That...wasn't one of my brightest ideas. I could have gotten you killed. I'm sorry." He held his hand out.

Snape stared at him for a long time, clearly trying to determine whether Sirius was serious or not. Finally he had to come to the conclusion that, to all appearances, he was. He reached out and they gingerly shook hands.

"I...I accept your apology," he said with none of his usual sarcasm.

Harry watched this with a certain amount of surprise. Of all the things had expected during his time at Hogwarts, watching Sirius and Snape bury the hatchet was not one he'd thought likely. He decided to bring the conversation back to the point before they could start sniping at each other again and ruin what had just been achieved.

"What about my idea?" he asked and both men turned to look at him. "About going after the Dark Lord's mind."

"Your...godfather is correct, Mr Potter," Snape said carefully. "It could be very dangerous."

"I know that, sir, Sirius," Harry said, looking at the two men, "but I want to try. At best, I could be able to get information; at worst, I annoy the hell out of him. Either way I think its worth trying."

Snape nodded and slowly, reluctantly, so did Sirius.

"But I want to be present," Sirius said with worry in his eyes.

Snape nodded. "Very well, Black. As long as you do not interfere." Snape's voice regained some of its normal bite. "Mondays and Wednesdays; Potions for the first hour; Occlumency during the second hour. We can move the lessons back down here, thankfully. I believe all of my Slytherins are now aware of what my role truly was, making our attempts at subterfuge irrelevant."

"They're not being...well, unpleasant about it?" Harry asked with surprise. "From the way Draco has been acting I would have thought..."

"No, Mr Potter," Snape said with amusement, "there have been no problems. Fewer of my students are interested in following the Dark Lord than you might think. Indeed, most have admired the cunning and subtlety it required to spy so successfully for so many years."

"Slytherins!" Sirius muttered.

"Correct, Black," Snape agreed with sly amusement.

Harry chuckled and then thought for a minute. "Hmm, Hermione's been at me to get the DA going again. Maybe I should and maybe I should invite some of those admiring Slytherins of yours, Professor."

"How very ecumenical of you, Mr Potter," Snape said with surprise.

"Well, the Sorting Hat did say we should be working together," Harry said matter-of-factly. "Maybe we should start that by using someone other than Draco Malfoy to symbolise Slytherin."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Let me know when the first meeting is on, Mr Potter, and I shall inform them. I am sure they would be interested."

Sirius had been watching this with surprise and some confusion. "What's this about the Sorting Hat?" he finally asked.

"The Sorting Hat's been getting a little opinionated the last couple of years," Harry said. "This year it even included an ultimatum. All four houses better start working together or it's going to leave and there will be nobody to sort the new students."

"I didn't know it could do that," Sirius said.

"It has not often stepped into the goings on at the school," Snape said calmly. "But when it does, it pays to listen." He stood. "Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do. If you wish to start your new lessons quickly, Mr Potter, I will have some time tonight. As it is Hufflepuff versus Ravenclaw tomorrow, I believe you will have plenty of time to recover."

"I'd like that, sir," Harry said eagerly. "What time?"

"Eight o'clock, Mr Potter. Do not be late." Snape turned back to his desk and Sirius and Harry grinned at each other and took that for the dismissal it was.

They returned later that night and found the Potions Master waiting for them. He had his robes wrapped around him and a sombre expression on his face.

"You may wish to delay this attempt," he said without preamble.

"Why?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Draco Malfoy was called back home this evening, to return late tomorrow. I believe he will take the Mark tonight. You may not wish to see that," Snape said.

Harry swallowed then his expression firmed. "No, I want to do it. He wouldn't be dragging Draco into this without a reason. If I can get through his shields, I might be able to find out why."

Snape nodded reluctantly. "Very well, Mr Potter, sit down." Harry sat down at the first desk and Snape turned to Sirius. "Sit down and stay out of the way unless I tell you to do something."

Sirius' eyes darkened for a moment and his lips twitched. He managed to swallow whatever he was going to say however and he sat down at the desk next to Harry.

"Now, Mr Potter, close your eyes and reach out along the link until you get to the Dark Lord's shields," Snape instructed.

Harry was silent and still, his brow furrowed as he slowly and carefully followed the link back to its source. Snape had taught him how to do this a few weeks ago but never allowed him to trace the link back too far. He followed it carefully until he was brought to a stop by something that felt fairly solid.

"Found them," he said.

"Good. Now feel around the shields until you find a weak spot. There will be one, Mr Potter, though it may be small."

Harry nodded and delicately began probing the wall in front of him. It seemed fairly uniform but eventually he found a small spot that was thinner and more delicate than the rest of the shield.

"Got one," he said firmly. "Now what?"

"Work away at that spot. You should be able to get all the way through."

Harry nodded absently and began mentally digging at the weak spot he had found. It was harder than he had thought it would be and he was soon sweating freely. Sirius shifted slightly in his chair, his face full of worry. He glanced at the Potions Master, whose face and attitude were calm and intent.

Suddenly Harry gasped. "I'm through," he said.

"Carefully work your way into the Dark Lord's mind," Snape said. "Do not move quickly or you will alert him to your presence. Creep around, do not bull your way in."

Harry nodded and settled further into his chair. He slowly, slowly eased his way through the small hole he had made in Voldemort's shields and mentally tiptoed around the Dark Lord's mind. After a few minutes, he found what he was looking for and gingerly settled himself into the Dark Lord's mind to see what was happening. As soon as he settled, he felt himself almost thrown forward and suddenly he could see what was happening.

He had expected to see a large gathering but instead Draco Malfoy was kneeling before the Dark Lord, who was in turn flanked by Lucius, Bellatrix Lestrange and Wormtail. There was no one else in the room. Harry tentatively reached out and found the answer close by in Voldemort's mind. They were the only ones he trusted now and he wouldn't allow anyone he didn't trust near him anymore. Harry watched the ceremony and winced as Voldemort magically burned the Dark Mark onto Draco's arm. He then shivered at the sheer malevolent glee in the Slytherin's eyes when he looked up to make his oaths to his new Lord. He then gasped and hung on for dear life as Voldemort whispered "Legilimancy" and proceeded to plunge through Draco's mind in order to ascertain his loyalty. Harry breathed

a sigh of relief when Voldemort came back into his own mind and somehow he managed to remain unnoticed. He then saw Draco rise and Voldemort also rose. The Dark Lord and his four Death Eaters then adjourned to a large study and Voldemort began to outline his task for Draco.

Snape and Sirius watched as Harry's face blanched and he began to shiver. Sirius carefully got up and moved over to sit next to his godson. He placed a gentle arm around Harry's shoulders and looked up at Snape with concern.

"Is this normal? Is he alright?" he asked quietly and urgently.

Severus walked over and crouched down in front of Harry. He gently touched the fingers of one hand to Harry's forehead and closed his eyes. He quickly pulled back.

"He is not being held against his will," Snape said with a frown. "It may be a reaction to what he is seeing. We can do nothing else but wait." He sat back on his haunches.

The two men waited until about twenty minutes later Harry slowly opened his eyes. He took in a deep breath and started shuddering. Sirius tightened his arm.

"You okay?" he asked gently.

Harry shook his head, his lips pressed tightly together and he kept taking deep breaths through his nose. Snape eyed him for a moment and then got up and went into his office. He came back with a bowl, which he held out to Harry. Harry took the bowl with a weak smile and proceeded to empty the contents of his stomach into it. When he had finished, Snape pulled out his wand and cleaned out the bowl and returned to his office with it. He came back out with a glass of water and handed it to Harry, who was now leaning against his godfather, a tired and slightly sick expression on his face. He slowly sipped at the water and after he had finished half of it, he took in a deep breath and let it out. He put the glass on the desk and looked up at the two men watching him with concern.

"I'm okay," he said a little breathlessly. He fixed his gaze on Snape. "You told me before school started that if I decided to go trawling around in the Dark Lord's mind I would probably regret it; that his mind was like a sewer. You were right about that." He picked up the glass and drained the rest of it. "You were also right about Draco taking the Dark Mark. I came in right in the middle of it. Draco didn't look like he was being pressured into it either. He looked like he was pretty pleased with the whole thing."

"Did anyone object about his age?" Snape asked. "The Dark Lord usually does not accept anyone so young."

"There really wasn't anyone there to object," Harry said. "There was only Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange and Wormtail. I found out why." He gave a tired grin. "I think your extended stint as a spy has made the Dark Lord paranoid. He used Legilimancy to ensure that those three were loyal and they are the only ones he will let near him. He did the same thing to Draco. I thought I was going to get caught but he never noticed I was there."

"Did he say why he allowed Draco to take the Mark so young?" Snape asked intently.

"Yes, he explained what he wanted Draco to do just afterwards," Harry said with a grimace. "He doesn't like you very much any more, sir. Draco has orders to either kill you himself or to arrange for you to be transported to Malfoy Manor so the Dark Lord can deal with you himself." He paused. "I think Draco's planning on doing it himself, sir, from the look on his face."

Snape leaned back on a desk with a tired expression on his face. Sirius helped Harry to his feet and placed a hand on Snape's shoulder.

"Come on, Severus," he said quietly. "I think this is where we go and tell all of this to Albus."

Chapter 27

When Harry came down to breakfast the next morning he looked pale and tired. He, Sirius and Snape had spent half the night closeted in Dumbledore's office discussing what Harry had seen. He was thankful that at least it was Sunday and he didn't have any classes. As he picked at his breakfast and his friends watched him with concern, he looked up at the Slytherin table. Draco was not there, he was not due back until tonight, but there seemed to be a certain amount of whispering going on amongst them. He looked back down at his plate.

"Harry, is everything alright?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Yeah," he said heavily, "I'm just tired but can you get everyone together and meet me in the Room of Requirement after breakfast?"

Hermione nodded and they both turned back to their respective breakfasts.

Half an hour later, Harry and friends, along with Master Nhean, Remus and Sirius were in the Room of Requirement. Harry watched the three adults walk in and raised an eyebrow at Hermione. She looked nervously back at him.

"I thought it must have something to do with what you and Sirius went and saw Professor Snape about last night and I thought they should know too," she said defensively.

"I'm not angry, Hermione," Harry said reassuringly. "I'm just surprised. I had planned on telling Remus and Master Nhean." He grinned at her. "You know, your ability to anticipate me is getting kind of scary."

Hermione rolled her eyes and they wandered over to where the others were gathered.

"You're going to tell everyone what happened last night?" Sirius asked and Harry nodded.

"Well, I did promise that I wouldn't keep things to myself this year," he said with a shrug.

There were chuckles from the others and everyone settled themselves in various chairs and cushions. Harry sat on the couch with Sirius lounging on one side and Ginny sitting on the other.

"Okay," Harry said, "most of you know about the question Hermione asked last night about why I wasn't feeling anything or seeing anything from Voldemort anymore and that Sirius and I went down to see Professor Snape."

Everyone nodded and Harry proceeded to fill them in on what Professor Snape's conclusions were and what had happened after

that. The news that Draco had taken the Dark Mark didn't surprise any of the Gryffindors but the news that he had been ordered to either kill the Potions Master or deliver him to Voldemort did.

"You don't Malfoy would actually try to kill Snape, do you?" Ron asked incredulously.

"I don't know," Harry said with a shake of his head, "but I think he might."

"What's Professor Dumbledore going to do?" Hermione asked.

"He going to be waiting for Draco when he gets back this evening and he's going to ask to see Draco's arms," Harry said grimly.

"He's going to expel him?" Ginny asked.

"He has to, doesn't he?" Neville said quietly. "I mean, Professor Snape's one thing, we know that he's a spy, but you can't allow an actual Death Eater to run around the school. He'd be hexing us all the moment our backs were turned." Neville smiled wryly. Of the six friends, Neville was the one who had changed the most this year. What the fracas in the Department of Mysteries had started, this year's lessons with Master Nhean and his aptitude for them was rapidly completing. The new air of confidence that was now around Neville only tended to fade when he faced Professor Snape.

"I wonder how many other Slytherins will get expelled then," Ron speculated.

"Well, that's the other thing I wanted to talk to you all about," Harry said. "I've decided to get the DA going again, this time as a proper school group." He turned to Remus and Sirius. "I was hoping that you two would consider helping."

Remus nodded. "Certainly, Harry, though if what I've been told is true, I don't think you really need my help." He shot a mischievous look at Sirius. "I do think that Sirius should get involved. It's high time he stopped freeloading and started contributing."

Sirius spluttered as the others laughed. "I'm not freeloading," he said mock-indignantly. "I'll have you know I am enjoying my newly acquired freedom." He laughed and became interested. "But, sure, I'll help. I was always good at Defence and Transfiguration."

"Good," Harry said with a smile. "Okay, it's Sunday today. How about we set the first meeting for Tuesday after Quidditch practice?" Everyone nodded and Harry pulled out the fake Galleon that Hermione had given all of the DA members last year. He concentrated and changed the date and time on it. "We'll have to tell everyone as well, just in case they aren't carrying their fake Galleon, and I'll let Professor Snape know when it's on."

"Why are you letting Snape know?" Ron asked with surprise.

"Because he thinks some of the Slytherins might be interested," Harry said. "That was the other thing he told us last night. Apparently not as many Slytherins as we thought are interested in joining the Death Eaters. A lot of them are pretty proud of Snape for his spying job."

"Huh," Ron grunted. "Well, I suppose they can't all be like Malfoy."

"Of course, they're not," Hermione said archly. "And this is probably what the Sorting Hat had in mind?"

Luna, who had been lying back on a cushion and staring at the ceiling, sat up and fixed Master Nhean with her penetrating gaze. "You don't believe that Draco's task is something we should worry about much, do you?" she said with her normal directness.

Nhean raised an eyebrow; he had indeed been thinking something along those lines. He knew better than to ask Luna how she knew though. This was not the first time she had done this to him this year and every time he asked how she knew she would go all wafty and vague on him. He had eventually chosen to respect her secrecy.

"Yes and no," Nhean said with a wink at Luna. "We should certainly take it seriously enough to ensure that the boy does not succeed but I do not feel that we should concentrate too much on it. This is merely a distraction; Voldemort lashing out at one who has betrayed him. You are still his primary target, Harry, and I think that is what we should concentrate on."

"In what way?" Harry asked.

"I think I will come to some of these DA meetings as well," Nhean said calmly. "It would not hurt for a few more people to have some knowledge of what can be done in battle conditions. Oh, it won't be anything like the concentrated training that the six of you have been doing but some basic knowledge wouldn't go astray."

"You think that Voldemort is going to indulge in something fairly big, then?" Remus asked.

"Yes," Nhean answered. "From what I understand of his personality from my discussions with Albus and Severus, he will feel that he has to do something grand in response to what we have done. To successfully invade his own domain, even if it was on a very directed hit and run mission with a single goal, would be very damaging to his ego and credibility. I think he will respond with a substantial attack and I think it will be here at Hogwarts."

There were indrawn breaths and grim faces from all in the room.

"I don't suppose I can get in on these training sessions?" Sirius asked. "I used to be an Auror once and I was a pretty good one. I wouldn't mind expanding my repertoire."

"Certainly," Nhean said, "though I warn you, you will not find the training easy. It is much harder for adult bodies to adapt to it,

particularly one that has been through as much as yours has in the last few years. If you choose to do this I must ask two things of you. Firstly that like the students, you will not be able to discuss much of what you do with others. Remus and Albus are fine but some of the techniques I will be teaching you can be quite dangerous if not taught properly. I do not want others attempting them without proper supervision from a Guild trainer; the consequences could be quite fatal. Secondly, if I tell you to stop, you will stop. Your body has suffered extreme stress over the last ten or so years. It will take time for it to recover fully. I will be watching carefully to ensure that you do not overstress yourself. I will expect you to obey me implicitly. Can you do this?"

Sirius stared at Master Nhean for a long moment, realising that this was not a joking matter. Then he nodded.

"I did it during my Auror training," he said seriously, "I reckon I can do it again."

Master Nhean nodded. "Very well, be in the Guild classroom on Monday morning. You can start your training then."

Sirius nodded and looked at Harry, who had been sitting very quietly. As he watched Harry looked up at his trainer.

"Master Nhean?" he said in a distracted voice. "There's something that's been bothering me since we got back from Malfoy Manor."

"What is it?" Nhean asked with interest.

"With my Oversight," Harry began slowly, "I can see some detail, like facial expressions and stuff, and I've noticed that the better I know someone the more detail I see. Like for Remus and Ron and Hermione and the others I can see a pretty clear, kind of ghostly version of their faces. Sirius' is getting clearer every day and for some of the teachers that I haven't really had anything to do with, like Professor Vector, there really isn't much detail at all. But when we went to Malfoy Manor, well, Voldemort's face was pretty clear which kind of makes sense. But I could hardly see anything of Lucius Malfoy and Wormtail's faces. I would have thought I would have seen more. How does this part of Oversight actually work?"

Nhean leaned back and tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "I believe I mentioned that the books that were written about the theory behind that part of Oversight were lost and that the theory wasn't well understood. So I can't really answer your question very well, but I can offer my own theory. I'm assuming that you think you probably know Lucius Malfoy and Wormtail as well as, if not better, than Professor Vector?"

Harry nodded. "I've never had her as a teacher and I've never really had much to do with her. I've probably spent more time with Lucius Malfoy than Professor Vector, I've certainly spent more time with Wormtail, though I suppose most of that was when he was a rat. Yet her face is clearer than theirs were."

"Hmm, well, my theory," Master Nhean held up a cautionary finger, "and it's just a theory mind you, is that Hogwarts in some way aids you with your magic. Magical dwellings such as Hogwarts gain a certain amount of sentience after a while and they can actually aid

those within. How do you think the Headmaster always seems to know what's going on? The school makes sure he knows." Harry and the others looked surprised at that. "My theory is the school is aiding you by enhancing your magic."

Harry looked stunned. "Why?"

"I don't know," Nhean said honestly. "I've had a few discussions about this with Albus which is how I came about my theory. A few times when you've cast magic during training, there has been an odd feel to it. Guild trainers are very sensitive to the feel of individual people's magic. At first, I merely thought it had something to do with the link you have with Voldemort but, after seeing him cast magic and getting the feel of it, I have come to the conclusion that the link has nothing to do with it. Albus mentioned to me that you consider Hogwarts to be your home. Magical dwellings tend to be very sensitive to that and they tend to like those who like them."

"You're saying that Hogwarts likes me and so it's helping me?" Harry said incredulously.

"Yes and that's why your Oversight works better here," Nhean said. "At Malfoy Manor, your Oversight was reduced to the level it should be at normally. Theoretically, you shouldn't have been able to see Voldemort's face as well as you did as you really haven't spent enough time around him but I suppose the link was the determining factor there."

"Oh," Harry said weakly, startled into speechlessness. He finally managed to gather himself together. "You mean, what I saw in Malfoy Manor is what I should really get used to?"

"Outside of Hogwarts? Yes," Nhean confirmed.

"Oh," Harry said again.

"Don't worry about it," Nhean said calmly. "You'll be spending most of your time at Hogwarts for the next couple of years anyway and your summers will be spent with those you know well, so you will have plenty of time to get used to it."

Harry nodded his head and Sirius ruffled his hair. "Yeah, in summer you'll either be with Remus and me or with the Weasleys so everything'll be fine," he said encouragingly then poked his godson in the ribs. Harry yelped as Sirius continued. "Now, you have to tell me a bit about what I'm going to be learning tomorrow. I want to be prepared."

Harry smiled gratefully at Sirius for changing the subject and began giving him an only slightly exaggerated description of how hard it was all going to be.

Sunday evening found Albus Dumbledore waiting in the middle of the Entrance Hall. He had teachers stationed around the Hall to keep the other students away. He saw a flicker of black from the corner of his eye and turned his head to see Severus approaching him, a grim look on his face. Albus nodded solemnly as Severus came to stand beside him and the two of them waited.

It was about twenty minutes before the doors opened and a pale but triumphant-looking Draco Malfoy strutted in. The expression on his face faded slightly when he saw the Head of Slytherin and the Headmaster standing in the middle of the Hall, clearly waiting for him.

"Mr Malfoy," Dumbledore said seriously, no trace of his normal twinkle in his eye.

"Headmaster," Draco responded warily.

"Mr Malfoy, would you mind coming over here and showing me your forearms?" the Headmaster asked sternly.

Draco's head reared back and anger flared in his eyes for a moment before he got himself under control. He glanced at Snape who was looking at him with an indecipherable expression.

"Why?" Draco asked harshly.

"Because I have been led to believe you have taken a rather irrevocable step," the Headmaster said calmly, "and I am rather hoping to be proven wrong."

Draco glared at Snape. "You shouldn't always believe everything you're told, Headmaster. Particularly if it comes from Snape," he snarled.

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore reproved gently then his face hardened. "Your arms, Mr Malfoy."

"And if I don't?" Draco asked defiantly.

"Then I will have to ask you to leave," the Headmaster said firmly.

Draco sneered and proudly shoved his sleeves up; displaying the Dark Mark he had gained the night before. Dumbledore sighed and the gaze he rested on the blond-haired Slytherin was regretful.

"Mr Malfoy," he asked, "did you do this willingly?"

"Yes," Draco said proudly, "I did! And I don't regret it!"

Dumbledore sighed and a look of contempt flickered across Snape's face.

"Mr Malfoy," the Headmaster said sternly, "I am afraid I have no choice but to expel you from Hogwarts. Professor Snape and I will accompany you to your dorm where you will pack your belongings. We will then go to my office where I will inform your parents to come and pick you up."

Draco's face paled as he realised that he would not be able to carry out his instructions but he raised his head in defiance. "Very well, Headmaster," he said loftily.

The Headmaster's face hardened. He and Snape took flanking positions next to Draco and escorted him down to the Slytherin rooms where they watched him pack. The Headmaster then levitated the trunk and they left the dorm. When they walked back out into the common room, they found many of the remaining Slytherins waiting for them. Snape watched the students of his house and was pleased that more than half seemed disgusted by Draco. He dismissed many of these students from his thoughts and turned his surreptitious attention to the others, mentally taking note of those that seemed upset or supportive of his soon to be ex-student.

The three of them walked up to the Headmaster's office where Dumbledore gestured peremptorily for Draco to take a seat. Snape took a position behind the seat he chose as Dumbledore made a quick floo call to Malfoy Manor. The Headmaster then took his seat behind his desk and they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally after nearly forty minutes, the fire flared green and Narcissa Malfoy stepped through and calmly brushed herself down. She gave her son one cool, almost contemptuous gaze then looked at Snape. She gave him a small, tight smile and a graceful nod which he returned then she walked over to the Headmaster.

"Headmaster," she said coolly, "I understand there is a problem with my son."

"Yes, Mrs Malfoy," Dumbledore said politely. "It appears that Draco has taken a...step that makes it impossible for him to continue as a student here at Hogwarts. Perhaps he may be better suited to complete his education at Durmstrang."

Narcissa's face hardened and she turned to her son. "Is this true, Draco? Have you chosen to follow your father's...path?" Her lip curled slightly at the last.

"Yes," Draco said defiantly and his mother's gaze turned to ice.

"I expected better from you, my son," she said coolly. "You have disappointed me greatly. It seems you truly are your father's son and not mine."

Draco jerked slightly as though he had been slapped and a strange look crossed his face. "Mother?" he began.

Narcissa interrupted him with a look that was positively glacial. "I think I would prefer it if you did not refer to me as that anymore, Draco. You are your father's son now. Come, we shall return to the Manor and I shall arrange for your transfer to Durmstrang."

Draco paled even further and a look of entreaty and loss crossed his face as he looked at his mother. She steadfastly refused to look at him and crossed to the fire and took some floo powder from a jar on the mantelpiece. She turned to face Dumbledore.

"Headmaster," she said with a polite nod. She turned to look at Snape. "Severus," she said with a small smile and a look of delight entered her eyes. "Congratulations on your excellent and elegant deception. I was most impressed."

She then turned back to the fire and threw the floo powder in. "Malfoy Manor," she said and gestured imperiously for Draco to go through. He obeyed her, looking somewhat stricken as he left the office. Narcissa followed him and his trunk through without a backwards glance.

"Will she be alright?" Dumbledore asked with concern.

"Yes," Snape said, still staring at the fire. "Lucius cares little for her opinions and I believe she has found a way to safeguard herself."

"And Draco?"

Snape sighed and turned to look at the Headmaster. "That, I believe, is largely up to Draco. He has failed his first task before he had a chance to start it. The Dark Lord will not be pleased but Draco may escape that one. I do not believe that I am the primary target. I am sure that the Dark Lord wishes me dead and no doubts every Death Eater will be instructed to kill me if they get the chance. But the fact remains, Potter is the Dark Lord's main target and he will not be diverted from that."

"Mmm, yes," Dumbledore mumbled, his brow furrowed in thought. "Well, perhaps this will keep Lucius' attention diverted for long enough."

"Headmaster?" Snape queried, confused by the comment.

Dumbledore's head snapped up. "My apologies, Severus," he said with a smile. "I have been keeping you and the others in the dark, haven't I? There is likely to be some upheaval at the Ministry, Severus. It seems a large group have gotten together and are making moves to oust Cornelius Fudge as Minister. The Order members in the Ministry have been making contact with them. We want to ensure

that this happens at a time that is most advantageous for us and that Cornelius' successor is someone we can work with."

"There is no way of stopping it?" Snape asked.

"No, not any more," Dumbledore said. "The best we can do is join in and hope that we can influence things enough. Our advantage is that much of it is being driven by Madam Bones and Professor Marchbanks. Both women are too strong-willed for Lucius Malfoy and any other Death Eater sympathisers. Arthur and Kingsley are liaising with them for us."

"And their candidate for Minister?" Snape asked.

"I believe Madam Bones has agreed to take on the role."

Snape nodded; he had been impressed by her handling of the Dursleys' trial. "That would work well. The Dark Lord gives scant attention to women. He believes them unintelligent and useless. He would spend much of his time trying to work on the men surrounding her, believing that they were the ones truly exercising the power of the Minister. He would believe her to be nothing more than a figurehead."

"Yes, that rather what we expected," Dumbledore said with satisfaction. "It will work well for us if that happens."

"Fudge cannot be unaware of this," Snape observed.

"No, he's well aware of what is happening and is desperately shoring up his position," Dumbledore said. "It seems that he has offended a fair number of people in the last year or two, particularly those who knew the Potters and have kept a weather eye on their son. They knew as well as we did that many of the articles on Harry were coming from his office and they were not happy about it. That the Minister would attack a young boy was something they did not like. Add those people to the ones who believed us when we said Voldemort had returned and you are actually talking about a decent number. Still we are well aware of what Cornelius is up to and will be able to counter many of the moves he makes."

"How?" Snape asked curiously. He wasn't aware they had anyone who was that close to the Minister.

"Percy Weasley," Dumbledore said with a pleased smile. "It seems the young man has thought long and hard about what happened last year and has come to the conclusion that he was wrong. Quite courageous of him really but then, he was a Gryffindor." Snape snorted and the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes deepened. "He approached his father privately to apologise for what he had said and done and Arthur suggested that he remain where he is and work for us. It is not easy for the young man. He desperately wishes to make amends to his mother and family but must maintain the distance for now."

"Will he be able to carry it off?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"Yes, I believe so," Dumbledore said. "He is aided by the fact that Cornelius tends to only see what he wishes to see."

Snape nodded with a sneer of contempt for the Minister. "I must go, Headmaster. I daresay some of my students may wish to approach me tonight. I wish to be available for them."

"What a good idea," the Headmaster said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Snape bowed shortly and left the room.

Chapter 28

Nearly all discussion on Monday centred on Draco Malfoy. Word had quickly spread that he had been expelled and what he had been expelled for. Crabbe and Goyle had wandered around looking lost until they zeroed in on Pansy Parkinson at lunchtime. She seemed unaffected by the loss of Draco until she looked over at the Gryffindor table. The glare she had directed at Harry had been remarkable for its hatred. Harry, for his part, didn't notice that. He just did not know Pansy well enough to see much detail in her overlay. It took the comments of those around him to clue him in to her opinions.

Tuesday night however proved that Pansy did not seem to be representative of the Slytherin students. Harry had duly informed Snape of the time and place of the first DA meeting for the year and shortly after he and his friends arrived so too did a contingent of Slytherins led by Blaise Zabini. They had been nervous and defensive as they walked into the room and Harry took a deep breath and strolled over to them.

"Hi," he said firmly. "I guess you've all come for the DA meeting."

"Yes, Professor Snape said we'd be welcome," Blaise said a little defensively.

"Yes, you are," Harry replied and gestured for them to sit down. "We probably won't do too much this time. I'm not sure how many people are going to turn up. We spread the word that it's an official group this year so we may get more than last year."

The Slytherins nodded and sat, staring around the Room of Requirement with interest. Once again it had taken on the appearance from the first meeting last year, with bookshelves full of Defence texts and a myriad of Dark Magic detectors. The Slytherins jumped a little when the door opened but relaxed when they saw their Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"Hello, everyone," Remus said with a smile and walked over to talk to Harry.

"What are they doing here?" came a loud, indignant voice from the doorway.

Everyone in the room turned to look with varying expression of surprise and irritation on their faces. Harry stepped forwards, a firm expression on his face.

"They're Hogwarts students just like everyone else, Zachariah," he said sternly. "And just like everyone else they've got a right to join the DA."

"But...but they're Slytherins!" Zachariah Smith said, aghast.

"You noticed?" Harry replied dryly. "What gave them away?" Small smiles and giggles came from some of the students standing behind

Zachariah and the Syltherins slowly began to relax at Harry's defence of them.

"You can't let Slytherins in the group! They'll...they'll just tell everything to You-Know-Who!" Zachariah blurted.

The Slytherins bristled and started to look angry, a reaction that was echoed by Harry.

"Not every Slytherin is as stupid as Malfoy," he said firmly. "Some of them are as clever as Professor Snape."

That rocked Zachariah back his heels as by now Snape's discovered role as a spy had been whispered around by all of the students. While Snape was still viewed with fear, trepidation and terror by the students, a certain amount of sneaking respect had crept in. Even the most biased of Gryffindors had to admit that keeping that kind of secret from Voldemort for that length of time was no mean feat and one worthy of respect. When Zachariah seemed unable to come up with an answer, the rest of the students pushed past him and into the room. A small group of them, headed by Cho Chang and Ernie MacMillan, walked over to the Slytherins.

"Don't worry about Zach," Ernie said a little pompously, holding out his hand to Blaise, "he has a tendency to open his mouth before he starts thinking. I think it's about time all of Hogwarts started working together against You...er, Voldemort."

Blaise shook Ernie's hand cautiously and Millicent Bulstrode stepped forward. "We're not all anxious to become Death Eaters, you know," she said aggressively. "Just because Draco and Pansy seem hell bent on throwing themselves at the Dark Lord's feet, doesn't mean we all want to."

"Exactly," Harry said firmly, "You all heard the Sorting Hat this year. Slytherins are meant to be subtle and cunning, not evil. Sometimes subtlety and the ability to put together a cunning plan is just what is needed. We can't all be Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws. I finally worked out what the Hat's been talking about the last couple of years. The Houses at Hogwarts are supposed to work together so that the strengths of one House balance the weaknesses of another. Gryffindor's courage, Hufflepuff's tenacity, Ravenclaw's intelligence and Slytherin's cunning." Harry paused as he remembered something. He slowly surveyed the room and the flowing energy colours of the students until he was sure that he had their complete attention. "And don't forget," he said solemnly, "it isn't just Slytherins who can be evil. It was Peter Pettigrew, a Gryffindor, who betrayed my parents, who led Voldemort right to them."

The deep silence that followed that statement lingered as everyone considered it. They had all heard this before, an explanation for Sirius Black swanning around the castle had, of course, been necessary but to hear it from Harry himself somehow made it more real. Harry let them all stew on that for a few minutes and then cleared his throat.

"Alright," he said, "I think we can start. It doesn't look like anyone else is coming."

Harry's friends settled down on the floor along with everyone else and Remus came to stand beside Harry.

"For everyone who wasn't here last year, the purpose of this group is to learn more about Defence Against the Dark Arts," Harry said firmly. "We started it last year because Umbridge was a complete incompetent and Hermione decided that she wanted to pass her OWL exam." Harry grinned at his bushy-haired friend who mimed throwing something at him as she grinned back. "We're called the Defence Association."

"I thought it was Dumbledore's Army," said Blaise with a sideways grin.

"Well, sort of," Harry said a little awkwardly, remembering what had happened because of that name. "Anyway, what I wanted to do tonight is work out where everyone is. Basically what people remember from last year and where all of you new people are in your knowledge. Re...Professor Lupin and Sirius will be helping us this year and Master Nhean will coming along to some of the meetings as well. So if everyone could split up into pairs we'll get started."

All of the students slowly shuffled around until Hermione gave an exasperated cry and walked over to Blaise and suggested they pair up. This seemed to break the ice a little and Harry's other friends also headed over to the Slytherins. Finally everyone was paired up and Harry got them working on what they had done last year while he and Remus walked around and helped and corrected. As they were doing this Sirius edged his way into the room. Harry grinned at him and gestured towards the students. Sirius nodded and joined Harry and Remus in their work.

An hour later, Harry was looking around the classroom with a pleased expression on his face. The DA members from last year had all remembered most of what they had learnt and the new students had picked everything up pretty well. He'd found a little more difficult this year as he now had to judge a spell on what he saw of its energy colours but both Sirius and Remus had been quick to help when needed and he was starting to work out how to judge the strength and accuracy of the spell from the energy colours he was seeing. He decided to have everyone work on their Patronus spell as the last thing for the night as everyone had seemed to enjoy that last year.

"Alright everyone," he yelled over the sound of hexes being cast. Wands were lowered around the room and the last few hexes fizzled out. "We probably should wrap things up soon but before you do, I'd like you to try your Patronus spells. With the Dementors likely to defect to Voldemort, I think it might be a useful one to know."

The DA members from last year smiled, they had enjoyed learning this spell. Harry headed over to the newer members along with Remus and they began to instruct them on the process. Very soon a variety of silvery animals were gambolling around the room. The Slytherins watched this with a little envy and some frustration.

"So how does it work again?" Millicent asked with a frown.

"You think of a really happy memory," Harry said patiently, "and say the incantation, 'Expecto patronum'. Look, I'll demonstrate."

Harry concentrated on the moment when he found out that Sirius was still alive. "Expecto patronum!"

As the Slytherins watched, a large silver stag burst out of the end of Harry's wand and galloped around the room. Remus and Sirius looked up from what they were doing and smiled at the sight, though a tinge of sadness remained in their eyes.

Harry watched the silvery form of his patronus for a moment and then turned back to the Slytherins. "It's the memory that's important," he said. "You have to choose a really happy one. You might have to try a few before you find the one that works and you should probably always have a few alternatives. It's not that difficult to produce a patronus here but when you are faced with a Dementor it becomes a lot more difficult and you'd better be sure that the memory is going to work."

The Slytherins nodded a little dubiously and stepped back to give it a try. As Harry watched them, Sirius walked up behind him and slung an arm around his shoulders.

"Nice patronus," he said quietly. "Moony told me about it but that the first time I've seen it. It's Prongs alright." He paused for a moment. "Have you thought about trying it yourself?"

"Trying what?" Harry asked.

"The animagus transformation."

Harry shrugged. "I had a few times but I'm not sure what kind of effect being blind will have. I was actually thinking about having the DA try to become animagi this year if we could get permission."

"Ah, well," Sirius said with a grin, "that's why I was late. I've already asked. Dumbledore said yes, as long as I am around to supervise."

Harry grinned. "Thanks, Sirius. I'm sure everyone's going to want to try."

"But not you?" Sirius pressed.

Harry shifted a little uncomfortably. "I...I want to, Sirius, but what if the Oversight doesn't cross over. I wouldn't be much good as a blind animal, would I?"

Sirius drew Harry a little closer. "Well, perhaps. But why don't you just try it first."

"Okay," Harry sighed and then chuckled. "It might be fun. I'd love to hear what Orinda would have to say."

Sirius looked down at his godson. The Runespoor that Hagrid had given him spent much of his time curled around Harry's neck like an odd necklace. The rest of the students had been a little wary of the black and orange creature at first but had soon learnt to ignore it. In the last couple of weeks however, Orinda had grown large enough to become uncomfortable if he stayed around Harry's neck for too long and he had taken to curling up on the desk during classes and on the table during training. Tonight however, the Runespoor was missing.

"Speaking of Orinda," Sirius said, "where is the critter?"

"Back in the dorm," Harry said as he watched some of the Slytherins start to meet with some success. "He wasn't really interested in coming along tonight; something about not wanting to be on the receiving end of misguided magic from incompetent bipeds."

Sirius laughed. "Don't tell me, the right head said that."

Harry laughed as well. "Yes, I've always thought it's a pity that Professor Snape doesn't speak Parseltongue. He'd get along very well with that aspect of my Runespoor."

Harry banged the end of his cane loudly on the floor and the students fell silent and looked at him. "Look, it's getting late everyone so I think we'll finish it there. We'll spend the next couple of meetings getting everything right from last year and then Sirius has offered to teach us about becoming animagi." There was an excited murmur from the students and Sirius stepped forwards.

"The Headmaster has given you all permission," he said with a smile, "but he has insisted that it must be done under my supervision." There were a few mutters and Sirius glared in that direction. "And he's right," he said sternly. "Becoming animagi is difficult and dangerous even with supervision. It's a wonder that James, Peter and I didn't end up doing something permanent to ourselves when we taught ourselves. Probably just sheer dumb luck. You lot are not going to get a chance to make any of those mistakes. I warn you though, some of you may not be able to make the transformation; most people can't. So, no practicing on your own. You only practice here, during DA meetings, with me."

Everyone nodded and Harry dismissed them all. The students wandered out of the room, discussing what they had done with excitement and pleasure.

"Harry!" Hermione said happily as she walked over, "I don't know whether you could tell but its working!"

"What's working?" Harry asked a little bewildered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Getting the Slytherins accepted by everyone," she said with a sigh. "They might have arrived in a group but they left in dribs and drabs, talking with students from the other houses."

"Oh," Harry said, "well, that's good." He hadn't expected that to happen so quickly but was pleased that it had. Anything that broke the hold of people like Malfoy and now apparently Pansy was fine

with him. He decided to change the subject and looked around at his friends. "So are you all going to try to become animagi?"

A chorus of enthusiastic yeses greeted that question and Sirius and Remus laughed.

"I think you've corrupted the lot of them, Padfoot," Remus said wryly.

"We, Moony, that's definitely we corrupted them," Sirius replied with amusement.

"Uhuh," Remus said unconvinced. "Come on, you lot. Off to bed."

Harry and his friends laughed and headed out of the Room of Requirement. The two remaining Marauders watched them go and Remus looked at his friend with amusement.

"I'm not sure you've realised what you've let yourself in for, Padfoot, old friend."

Harry was relieved when the next few weeks settled into something more routine. With Draco now gone, the air around the Slytherins

seemed to change a little. Pansy, Theodore Nott, Crabbe and Goyle had formed the core of a small group who were most displeased with what had happened to Draco and were not backward in making that known. But the rest of the Slytherins didn't seem to miss him much and Blaise Zabini had become the new leader. It was clear to Harry and his friends that Blaise wasn't entirely comfortable with this but the others had left him no choice.

The DA meetings were now moving into very high level territory. They had worked their way through the few seventh year spells they didn't know and Remus and Harry were now taking them into some very elevated levels. The animagi lessons were coming along much slower; partly because Sirius was being cautious but also because the spell was difficult. Sirius was however ready to try the first part of the transformation in the next couple of lessons. The visualisation spell was probably the easiest part of the whole process. It required the witch or wizard to clear their mind and cast the spell. If it worked they would be able to see what animal they would turn into when they cast the full spell; the trick was getting the visualisation spell to work in the first place.

They were also waiting uneasily for Voldemort to make his next move. Some of the Slytherins reported that Draco had been seen, alive and well, at Durmstrang so they at least knew that Voldemort had not punished him too severely for his failure. But with no other word than that, they were left in the nasty position of having to wait for whatever came. They made a variety of plans, trying to keep them flexible enough to take into account a number of different possibilities. The one thing everyone agreed upon from Snape to Dumbledore to Moody was that whatever Voldemort had planned, Hogwarts was the likely venue.

Harry and the rest of the students had little time to dwell on this. They were kept busy with the continuing round of classes, Quidditch

practice and games, various club meetings and, in the case of Harry and his friends, training. Master Nhean had stepped up their training until the Battle Guard was more than just a name.

Harry and his Battle Guard stood in a defensive posture in the middle of the Guild Classroom while Master Nhean and Sirius stood against one wall. Everything had been cleared out of the classroom, including the mats and Nhean and Sirius were surrounded by several protective spells. The door had been locked and warded to a fare-the-well and not even the Headmaster would be able to breach it easily. Nhean had a new type of combat training planned for today, one that he had said was possibly dangerous, and it had Harry and the others extremely nervous. He had not told them what was going to happen; all he had said was that they would need to use magic as well as weapons.

"Are you ready," Nhean said from his position by the wall.

Harry and his friends nodded grimly and set themselves for whatever was going to happen next. Nhean stepped outside the protective wards and raised his wand. He began chanting in the odd, dark language that echoed and reverberated around the room, even though the Guild Master was speaking no louder than normal. Sirius joined the students in their nervous shifting; even he did not know what was planned. Nhean had told him that he could only watch and was not, under any circumstances, to interfere. On the final sharp word, Nhean whipped his wand up, then down and in the far corner of the room a large creature appeared. It was perhaps nine feet tall and stood on two legs. It was covered in an armoured carapace, similar to that of insect and its face was an odd mix of animal and insect. It had

two forward-facing eyes, slitted like a cat's, but in place of a mouth it had a wickedly hooked beak. Its arms ended in long sharp hooks and its feet were viciously clawed. It stood looking around in confusion for a moment and then its attention was caught by the six students in the middle of the room. Nhean stepped back within the wards and watched to see what would happen.

"Mione, what is it?" Harry snapped as he gave the hand signal for the group to retreat. One of the hardest lessons that they had had to learn was when to retreat; whether that was retreating like they were now, because they were faced with an unknown quantity, or retreating for real, because they were confronted with overwhelming odds and to fight would be to die. They had had to learn that you could not win them all and sometime the best move was to run away.

Hermione frowned as she moved along with the others. Master Nhean had told her that she would know what they were facing today; that their opponent had been in one of the books he allowed her to read. The six had all taken on separate roles within the Battle Guard. Harry was their leader; he was the one who ran the show, he selected and approved the plan they used, he gave the orders and accepted the responsibility for them. Master Nhean had given him extensive lessons in how to lead and how to command and had taught him that these were two separate but related things. Harry had been nervous at first but time and practice had shown him that this was something he was good at.

Hermione had naturally become the brains of the group. Her already extensive knowledge had been bolstered by the books Master Nhean had given to her, loaned to her or directed her to in the library. These were not just books on spells and hexes but also books on people and places, creatures of all description and objects and weapons, both magical and muggle. She had, not to put too fine a point on it, eaten it up. Master Nhean had tested her as rigorously on her

burgeoning knowledge as he did her weapons skills until she had reached a point now that if someone asked her what something was, she generally could not only tell them but also give them a précis on its history, strengths, weaknesses and how it could be used, destroyed, countered or defeated. She had carried this mental discipline over into her schoolwork and had gone from being merely an excellent student to a truly formidable one that was topping the class in every subject she was taking.

Ron had become their master of tactics and strategy. His knowledge of chess tactics was proving very useful in combat situations and his ability to see several moves ahead in chess was also something he had been able to transfer to the battlefield. Master Nhean had added to this by assigning him a continuous stream of books to read. Some were strict texts on battle tactics but many were biographies and studies of famous military leaders, both wizarding and muggle. Ron had groaned at first at having more reading to do but had quickly discovered an interest in this particular subject. He had almost jeopardised his position in the group at first when his studies had started to suffer. Master Nhean had given him a stern warning about that, reminding him that his training could only continue if he kept up with his school work. He had tried to muddle through on his own for a while until finally relenting and going to Hermione for help. In doing so he had gained two things! ; a study schedule that he did his best to keep to and a girlfriend. Somewhere in the course of that help, he and Hermione had managed to crystallise what was between them. While he was nowhere near the standard that Hermione was setting, he had improved his marks somewhat. He was also developing the ability to examine a battle situation and put together a variety of plans. These he would present to Harry and between the two of them, they would work out the best one for their goals, though Harry always had the final say.

Ginny had taken it upon herself to learn everything she could about healing, both magical and muggle. She had hesitated long and hard before doing this, knowing that along with everything else she had

her OWLs at the end of the year. She had eventually gone to Professor McGonagall and asked her for advice and help. Professor McGonagall had given her that advice, straight and to the point, and when Ginny had still decided to continue, had helped her with setting up times that she go down to the hospital wing and learn what Madam Pomfrey had to teach. She too had launched herself into an extended reading program, getting her hands on as many medical texts as she could. When she started this she had discovered that she had something of a talent for it. Surprisingly, it had been Sirius who had helped her with the muggle side of things, somewhere along the line he had picked up a fair smattering of basic muggle first aid which he had willingly taught her and he had also found ! for her some basic first aid texts. She had then screwed up her courage and approached Professor Snape about the best way to carry some basic healing potions in a fight. He had insisted that she prove to him that she actually knew how to brew such potions properly before he would help her and she had offered up a silent paeon of thanks that she had elected to speak to Hermione before she had taken this step. The older girl had suggested that Professor Snape might take this attitude and had advised her to make sure she knew what she was doing. So she had studied the basic healing potions until she was sure she could make them and had managed to produce acceptable versions under the eagle-eyed gaze of the Potions Master. He had examined the potions carefully, made a few biting comments about where she could improve and than disappeared into his office. When he returned he was carrying a wide leather belt which had small pockets built into it that were the perfect size to hold ! small potion vials. He had then instructed her to come down t! o the potions classroom on Saturdays with Harry where she would brew some of the more common potions she would need. He had said that if she were going to use them, she should brew them. So now, as she backed away from the hook-clawed creature, she wore that belt around her waist, complete with potions.

Neville had continued his improvement with his weapons work, until he could now match both Harry and Master Nhean well when they were sparring. He took his Point position in the Battle Guard very seriously. He and Harry had just started in the last couple of weeks to

work with other weapons and had also just begun a program that Master Nhean called 'Anything Goes'. This program consisted of standing in the middle of the room and itemising everything that could be used as a weapon, how it could be used as a weapon and in what order they should use it. Master Nhean had told the both of them that in future lessons, he would play the aggressor and make them put all of this into practice. Neville was also wearing a small bag on his belt that contained something fairly useful from his Herbology studies. During his work in his extended study project he had been allowed into one of the greenhouses that was normally off-limits to students. He had gone in to gather specimens! of a plant he needed. He had, however, been tired from training the previous day and as such had been just a fraction more careless than he would normally have been. Thus he had discovered one of the denizens of that greenhouse in the worst way possible. It was a small, pretty-looking shrub with small, pretty flowers that gave off an absolutely heavenly scent. It had however grown a very formidable protection against having its flower picked in the form of three-inch long thorns. Neville had discovered these thorns when he had accidentally stumbled against the plant. What made matters worse was the fact that once imbedded in flesh, the thorns then broke off the shrub and worked their way in until they had no more than the barest end still visible. They then had to be pulled out by hand as magic would not work against them. Neville had been informed by an apologetic Professor Sprout that the plant was known as 'the shrub from hell'. Once the dozen or so thorns that Neville had acquired had been removed and the wounds healed, he had picked one of them up and had promptly received an abrupt lesson that the thorns did not lose their ability to burrow into flesh once they were no longer attached to the shrub. Once Madam Pomfrey had pulled the thorn out of his thumb, he had had something of a brainwave. Two weeks after his unfortunate discovery, after carefully reading all he could about the shrub from hell and asking Professor Sprout many questions, he had returned to the greenhouse where he had carefully plucked nearly two dozen of the long thorns and placed them in a specially prepared bag, points down. He had used one of these thorns for the first time in one of his practice bouts with Harry, after first learning how to remove them, and his judicious use of it had allowed him to win for the first time. Master Nhean had been suitably impressed with his tactic but had told him that it would probably be better for him to simulate the use of the thorns than to

actually use them on his friends. Neville and Harry had grinned at each other and agreed.

Luna had managed to surprise them all. She had finally admitted to them her little secret. This admission had come after she had intervened in a practice bout similar to this one. She had insisted that they move in a direction that seemed pointless. Harry and Ron had argued with her but she had been adamant. Eventually the boys had given in to her insistent demand and had done what she had asked. They had been able to catch their opponent unawares and defeat it fairly easily. The five students had stared long and hard at Luna after the bout, debating whether to ask her or not. She had sighed, rolled her eyes and admitted to them that she had known what was going to happen. Luna's secret had turned out to be a limited form of foresight. She didn't particularly like it very much, she found it very disconcerting to get these occasional flashes of the future but she had learned to largely ignore them. When Master Nhean had asked her why she had not gotten any kind of training to learn to control her ability, she had remarked that her mother had been teaching her before she died and that afterwards she had not wanted to leash her gift. It seems that by learning to control it, she had possibly missed the vision that would have warned her of her mother's death. She had decided it was preferable to see everything than to miss one thing. Master Nhean had then taken her aside for a quiet and very intense discussion that the others had not been privy to. The upshot of this discussion was Luna receiving lessons from Master Nhean himself in control though the others were never present during these lessons. She also allowed her gift free reign during their practice bouts and used the information she received. Her gift wasn't consistent nor could it be relied upon but the odd flashes she did get were always useful.

The creature followed them as they slowly backed around the classroom. It seemed confused and hesitant and this allowed Hermione time to wrack her brains for its identity. "It's called a Hookbeast," she finally said a little dryly, "which was a very original

thought by its discoverer." She paused as she sorted through everything she had read about the creature in front of them. "Okay, it's fairly well armoured as I'm sure you've all seen. Harry, it's got an armoured carapace, front and back, hooked beak and I'm sure you've been able to identify the hook claws with your Oversight. It's vulnerable at the joins between the sections of carapace but it's pretty quick with those claws. It has a certain invulnerability to magic but we should be able to slow it down enough with the Impedimenta curse enough to close in to use our swords. We're going to have to cast the spell in groups though, I don't think one curse will effect it that much.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other and exchanged a quick flurry of hand signals. Finally Harry nodded.

"Usual groups," he said shortly. "Usual pattern, using magic this time. Give it two rounds with the Impedimenta then in with swords. In and out quickly, don't get caught in there, even slowed those claws could do some damage. Alright?" There were five quick acknowledgements. "Okay, on three. One, two, three!"

At Harry's last word, he stepped forward to stand next to Neville, threw out his left fist which was wrapped around his scabbard, Neville pointed his wand and they both yelled, "Impedimenta!"

The Hookbeast staggered as the combined curse hit it and then gave an unearthly howl. Harry and Neville quickly dropped back to the rear of the group and Ron and Ginny stepped forward and repeated the curse. They too then dropped back, this time to either side of Harry, allowing Luna and Hermione to step forward and cast their spells. The two girls dropped back into their usual Rear Guard position and Harry and Neville stepped forwards again to repeat the pattern. The repeated curses were starting to have an effect on the Hookbeast. It

kept trying to move forward to attack but their curses kept knocking it back.

After Ron and Ginny released their curses for the second time, Harry saw the energies of the creature shimmer. Master Nhean had taught him that this particularly shimmer indicated that whatever he was looking at was hurt or tired. It was not indicative of deep hurt or tiredness but just that whatever was happening was starting to make an impact.

"Change to weapons!" he yelled as Hermione and Luna moved forwards.

They obeyed his instructions smoothly and darted in underneath the creature's flailing arms and aimed the points of their swords for the gaps in the carapace. Their swords struck home and they darted out and back into their normal positions before the Hookbeast could focus its attention on them. As the two girls ran back to their positions, Harry kept his attention on the creature. The shimmering intensified and he gestured to Neville. The two boys ran forward and mimicked the actions of the girls before retreating again to their formation. This time the Hookbeast, infuriated by the repeated attacks, followed them, its hook claws flailing at the six students.

"Circle and attack!" Harry ordered.

The six students separated into their pairs and swiftly encircled the enraged Hookbeast, being careful to stay out of range of the wicked claws. The creature was facing Harry and Neville and they feinted towards it before retreating step by step. Ron and Ginny circled

around behind it and drove their swords into a gap in the carapace. The Hookbeast bellowed and turned to face them. The siblings darted backwards, drawing the creature's attention and allowing one of the other pairs to make their attack. Finally, the Hookbeast began to stagger, thick black blood seeping out from under its carapace in many places.

Harry eyed it warily for a moment then made his decision. "Close in!" he yelled. "Finish it off!"

The six students moved in unison, darting in and driving their swords in as deep as they could then ducking away from the agitated and desperate swipes from the Hookbeast. They darted in again and this time Harry and Neville's swords found their mark. When the six students ran back out again, the Hookbeast bellowed and fell. It convulsed a few times and then became still. Harry's Battle Guard moved back into their positions around him and backed away from the carcass of the creature they had just fought. A previous bout where their supposedly defeated enemy had jumped back up and attacked them from behind had taught them not to take things for granted and to always take this approach after a battle.

Master Nhean dispelled the wards and shields surrounding Sirius and himself and stepped forward. He waved his wand at the now-deceased Hookbeast. The body shimmered and the energy that had created it dissipated and flowed back into the floor of the classroom from whence it had come. The blood which was coating the swords of Harry and his friends disappeared along with their adversary and they gratefully sheathed their weapons. Nhean indicated for them to sit and they gratefully dropped to the floor.

"Well done," Nhean congratulated them. "Well done indeed. Hermione, that was good recall and delivery of information. Ron, Harry, good plan and good execution. The change of plan to take advantage of the change in circumstances was also well done, Harry. Your dispatch of the Hookbeast was quick and efficient."

"Would it be any different if it was real?" Hermione asked.

"But, my dear," Nhean said sternly, "it was real. The spell I use for these bouts creates a real creature out of the energy. That was a real Hookbeast."

Hermione paled. "Oh," she said weakly as the others grinned at her. That wasn't the first time she had asked that question. She couldn't seem to accept that the creatures they faced, though created out of energy by Master Nhean, were very, very real.

"Now, I think that is enough for today," Master Nhean said, clapping his hands briskly. "I will have a new challenge for you tomorrow."

Harry and his friends groaned as they pulled themselves to their feet. They trooped out of the room, chatting intensely about what they had just faced and how they had done.

Master Nhean turned to face Sirius, who had remained very quiet throughout the whole thing. "Well?" Nhean asked.

"That was remarkable," Sirius said, shaking his head in amazement.
"They've really gelled together well."

"Yes," Nhean replied with a smile, "I'm really very proud of them. I've been pushing them hard and they've been responding admirably."

"Will they be ready in time for whatever Voldemort is planning?"

"Yes, I believe they may be," Nhean said firmly.

Chapter 29

Sirius raised his hands and waved them around. "Oy! Everyone!" he bellowed and then whistled loudly.

The students in the Room of Requirement all turned around to stare at Sirius with varying degrees of surprise. He looked back at them with exasperation.

"Hey, don't look at me like that," he said. "You were the ones who wanted to learn to become animagi. I know it's the day before Christmas break but you wanted to learn." He grinned at them.

The students grinned back at him and settled down on the various chairs and cushions that the Room of Requirement had provided. Most of the DA students had opted to try the animagus transformation and they were eager to try tonight's activity. Sirius wanted them to try the visualisation spell tonight, they had been practising the steps for it and tonight they would try it one by one under Sirius' supervision to see if they could get it to work. Sirius had warned them that there was a good chance it wouldn't work the first time...or the second time or even possibly the tenth time. If it continued to not work they had two choices; either give up the idea entirely or persist. He then mentioned that it had taken Peter nearly twenty tries before he managed his visualisation. Oddly enough, that particular piece of news made them all more determined to try. By now they all knew what Peter had done to both Sirius and Harry and even the Slytherins agreed that the little rat's actions were pretty despicable.

Sirius walked amongst the students, calmly explaining the process to them and helping them to clear their minds. He had enjoyed working with the DA and even more he had enjoyed working with Master Nhean. They had had some fairly vociferous arguments before Nhean had managed to impress upon Sirius that he was serious. He would not allow the animagus to overextend himself. He was quite happy to teach Sirius but only on his own terms. He was not anywhere near the league of Harry and his friends and would probably never be but the disciplined exercise had done wonders for him. He knew he would never look the way he did when he was younger; twelve years in Azkaban and the months spent in limbo behind the Veil had made sure of that but he at least wanted to be able to keep up with his godson.

He stopped in the middle of the classroom and surveyed the students. They looked like they had grasped the idea of clearing their minds fairly well but the next part would find that out for sure. He crouched down next to the nearest student.

"Try the visualisation spell," he suggested quietly.

The student, Cho Chang, nodded and muttered the words to the spell. "Ostendo bestia latere."

The air in front of her shimmered for a moment and Sirius held his breath. The shimmering faded and she opened her eyes and grimaced at him.

"Didn't work," she said reluctantly.

"Nope," Sirius replied casually, "but keep trying. That was a good first effort."

Cho smiled and closed her eyes. Sirius stood and moved to the next student to repeat the process. He was fairly encouraged by the time he got to Harry. Nearly half the students had achieved at least that odd shimmering and a handful had achieved a little more. Harry's five friends had all gone the furthest; each of them had managed an amorphous blob. They had seemed disappointed at that until he had assured them that he and Prongs hadn't done any better on their first attempts. He crouched down next to Harry, who seemed to be handling the idea of clearing his mind better than anyone else. Sirius supposed his Occlumency lessons had something to do with it. Sirius scowled at the thought; he wasn't really comfortable with the idea of Snape teaching Harry anything, let alone something like Occlumency and Legilimency. He and Snape were largely avoiding each other; neither was really sure how to treat each other and both were having trouble letting go of the past.

Sirius shrugged that thought away as he crouched down next to Harry. "Try the spell," he murmured.

Harry nodded slowly. "Ostendo bestia latere," he whispered.

The hair on the back of Sirius's neck stood on end as the air in front of Harry shimmered violently and slowly began to coalesce. He started grinning, he somehow wasn't surprised. Harry had never really managed to do anything normally when it came to unusual forms of magic. He watched with delight as the form coalesced and then he gave Harry a nudge.

"Harry, open your eyes. With any luck you'll be able to see it with Oversight," he murmured.

Harry obediently opened his eyes and gasped. He could indeed see the form floating in the air in front of him. It was a large canine, that much he could tell, the rest he would have to rely on others to tell him.

"What kind of dog is it?" he asked with wonder, loud enough to cause eyes to pop open around the room.

"Whoa!" Ron exclaimed and got up to take a closer look. "Mean-looking thing! Good one, Harry!" Ron slapped Harry on the shoulder as the other students gathered around.

"It's some kind of wolf, actually," Sirius said, examining the image. He then looked up at Hermione. "Hermione?"

The bushy-haired girl frowned and walked around the image. "You're right about it being some kind of wolf. What I really need..." She trailed off and looked around, grinning as she found the book she wanted on the bookshelf nearest to her. "Ah, that's the one!" she said and grabbed it. She opened it to the page she wanted and compared the picture within to the image still floating in front of Harry. "Here we are! I thought that's what it was. A Dire Wolf." Eyebrows went up all over the room and Hermione started reading some of the information in the book. "Dire Wolves have existed for millennia; they're actually a prehistoric species of wolf that was thought to have become extinct

about 11,000 years ago. In actuality, the prehistoric witches and wizards, shamans I suppose they were back then, hid them because they'd altered them drastically. They allowed the unaltered Dire Wolves to die out and kept those that had been altered to establish a new breed of Dire Wolves. They ! aren't much bigger than an ordinary wolf but they are much more intelligent and vicious. They have larger jaws and teeth and are usually black. Muggles have a myth that Dire Wolves are wolves that have been brought back from the grave to hunt down enemies but that was been officially debunked about a thousand years ago."

She suddenly stopped and began giggling. Harry, Sirius and the others stared at her as the giggling continued.

"Hermione?" Harry said carefully. "What's so funny?"

Hermione, caught in her giggles, could only wave a hand at him and then at Sirius. When she finally got herself under control, she managed to tell them what had set her off.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, the odd stray giggle still escaping from her. "Dire wolves hunt in packs and often take over an ordinary wolf pack." She dissolved into giggles again.

Harry and Sirius looked at each other, somewhat mystified. They couldn't see what was so funny about that.

"Uh, Mione?" Harry said slowly. "That hasn't really explained anything."

Hermione took a deep breath and got herself under control again. "Um, well, obviously with this form you'll be able to run with Padfoot and Moony at the full moon."

Harry looked surprised and then delighted. He knew that Padfoot and Moony still went out on the night of the full moon and ran in the Forest. Not even the Wolfsbane potion could stop that ingrained imperative in the werewolf; it only stopped him from killing or maiming people. With his animagus form, he'd be more than capable of running with them. Sirius too looked delighted; the idea of running with his best friend and his godson filling both him and his canine self with excitement. They then looked at Hermione with confusion.

"There's nothing funny about that, Hermione," Harry said happily. "That's great!"

Hermione giggled again. "Um, that not it, Harry." She paused and tried to find a way to explain it. "Um, well, wolves...well, canines in general tend to have a hierarchical structure. That's where the saying 'alpha male' comes from. I guess Moony would be the alpha male?" She looked at Sirius for confirmation.

Sirius looked surprised. "Yeah, of course he is. He's bigger and stronger than Padfoot. That's the way it works, the biggest and strongest male gets to be the leader." Sirius stopped and considered things then he too began to laugh.

Harry scowled at the two of them. "Alright, someone want to let me in on the joke?" he said irritably.

Sirius stifled his laughter. "The first time you run with Moony and I is going to be interesting, Harry," he said with a grin. "Your animagus form will be big enough, strong enough and vicious enough to take on even Moony. Moony's not going to want to give up his status that easily and the instinct of the wolf will mean that the first night is going to be spent with the two of you fighting it out for the job of alpha male."

Harry's jaw dropped open and he began to look a little distressed. Sirius hastened to reassure his godson. "Don't worry, Harry" he said earnestly, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's perfectly normal. Hell, Moony and I did the same thing the first time we ran together. You should have seen the expressions on Prongs' and Wormtail's faces the next morning. They thought we were going to kill each other but that's not what it's all about. It's about supremacy and being the strongest and best." He paused and ruffled his godson's hair. "Don't worry. You'll understand after you've spent some time in your animagus form."

Harry nodded a bit dubiously. "Can I try the transformation now?" he asked.

Sirius looked startled and sat back on his haunches to think things through. Mostly he was trying to remember what he and James and Peter had done. He slowly began to nod as he remembered the night he and Prongs had managed the visualisation. They'd immediately

tried the transformation; Prongs had succeeded but it had taken him another couple of nights to manage it.

"Yeah, but don't be surprised if it doesn't work. James managed it right away but it took me a bit of time," he warned.

Harry nodded and concentrated on making the transformation. There wasn't much finesse involved; it was mostly a matter of fixing your mind on the creature that your visualisation had shown you and mentally willing yourself to become that creature. If you had the ability to change, your magic would enable the change to occur. Harry concentrated hard on the image of the Dire Wolf he had seen through his Oversight and what he knew of them other than that and was startled when he felt himself almost flowing into another shape.

Many of the DA students jumped backwards as Harry suddenly changed into the large black Dire Wolf whose image they had seen with the added extra of a thin white lightning bolt-shaped blaze on his forehead. For himself, Harry sat frozen with surprise for a long moment. He then gave a startled yelp when he realised that he could see normally. He stood abruptly, much to the surprise of the others in the room, and started shivering. Sirius saw the shivering start and buried his hands into the Dire Wolf's ruff, turning the animal's head to face him with main strength.

"Harry!" he said in alarm. "Change back! Come on, Harry, change back!"

He saw the wolf's eyes focus on his for a minute and then he was clutching his godson's hair. He quickly let go and drew Harry's shaking body close.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What happened?"

Harry was staring blindly around the room, clearly not seeing anything. Sirius gave him a small shake.

"HARRY!" he bellowed into his godson's ear and Harry's head shot around. "Calm down and tell me what's wrong."

A blanket was suddenly shoved into Sirius' hands and he wrapped it around Harry before looking up to thank whoever had had the presence of mind to wish for the blanket that the Room of Requirement had so handily provided. He looked up into the grave face of Blaise, who nodded once before moving back into the group of students. He quickly turned his attention back to his godson.

"Harry, please tell me what's wrong," he pleaded.

Harry swallowed and shook his head. Somewhere in the change, either into the wolf or back, his Oversight had been lost and he quickly reinitiated it. He sighed when the room lit up and looked at Sirius.

"I...sorry, Sirius," he said weakly. "I didn't mean to freak out on you like that. It's just...I...I could see!"

"What?" Sirius blurted.

"I could see," Harry repeated. "As the wolf, I could see normally!"

Exclamations came from everyone in the room while Sirius stared at him, flabbergasted.

"Really?" Sirius asked dumbfounded.

"Yes," Harry said. "That's why I reacted like that. I was so surprised! I was expecting to either see something like what I do with Oversight or nothing at all. Sirius, how did that happen?"

"I...I don't know," Sirius said, running a hand through his hair and looking confused. "I've never heard of anything like that happening before. Maybe Minerva might know, she knows far more about transfiguring things than I do."

Harry nodded and then moved away from his godfather, shaking the blanket off. He concentrated and swiftly changed back into the black Dire Wolf. He stood up and shook himself before looking around the room. Sirius grinned, obviously the ability to be able to transform and the ability to see again was far more interesting than figuring out why.

He stood and transformed into Padfoot. He padded over to the large wolf and whined, dropping to his belly and then rolling over onto his back. The wolf turned and looked at him then dropped his head down and gently took Padfoot's throat in its jaws. Padfoot's whined again and then gave a little yelp. The wolf let him go and Padfoot rolled back over and stood up. He immediately dropped into the classic canine 'let's play' stance, with his front legs stretched out in front of him, his head low with mouth open in a doggy grin and his tail wagging. The wolf returned the doggy grin and charged at the big black dog, initiating a bout of wrestling. The members of the DA watched in open-mouth awe as the two canines wrestled, though they all noted through their amazement that the great Dire Wolf allowed his doggy friend to win some of the time. Finally the two canines separated and shook themselves. Padfoot transformed back into Sirius and he grinned down at his godson. Harry transformed back, re-established his Oversight and grinned up at Sirius.

"I see what you mean," he said a little ruefully, now understanding a little better what Sirius had meant about his impending first meeting with Moony. He hadn't even known what he was going to do when Padfoot had submitted before him like that but his wolf instincts had taken over and had made him accept Padfoot's submission before the pack leader.

Sirius chuckled. "I think I'm going to watch you and Moony from a safe distance," he said with a barking laugh.

"What was it like?" Hannah Abbot asked with excitement.

"Kind of weird," Harry said with a half-grin. "I was kind of me but mostly the wolf if that makes any sense."

"Sort of," Hannah replied. "I guess we'll understand more when we manage it for ourselves."

The others murmured in agreement and settled back down onto the various chairs or cushions they had claimed, determined now to try for themselves. Sirius laughed again and threw an arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Why don't you shift back into..." he paused. "You know, we'll have to come up with a name for your animagus form. Anyway, shift back and get used to it a bit more. I'd better supervise this lot."

Harry nodded eagerly and transformed back into the black wolf while Sirius began wandering amongst the students once more. Harry wandered around the room examining and sniffing things with interest as the others went back to their attempts at the visualisation spell. He found that the longer he spent as the wolf the more comfortable he became and the more wolf-like he felt. He was still definitely Harry but it was as though he was becoming Harry-wolf as opposed to Harry-man. When he heard a yelp from behind him, he turned his head lazily to see Ron, staring in surprise at the image that had formed in front of him. He padded over and sat down, cocking his head as he examined the image. He then transformed back and shook his head. He re-initiated his Oversight, sighing as he did so; that promised to get annoying in the future. He examined the image with Oversight, remembering what it had looked like through his wolf eyes. Ron's animagus form was that of a dog, specifically ! a red setter. Harry grinned at his oldest friend.

Ron flashed an excited look at him as he examined the form in front of him. He then tried the actual transformation. His brow furrowed as he concentrated but then he let out his breath in a rush.

"Damn!" he said in frustration. "How did you do that, mate?"

"I don't know," Harry replied thoughtfully. "I just concentrated hard and flowed into the new shape." He laughed ruefully. "Somehow, I don't think that's going to help though, is it?"

Ron shook his head in exasperation and Sirius, who had come up behind the two boys, laughed.

"It took me three days to figure it out, Ron," he said, "and it took Peter nearly a month. Don't worry, you'll get there."

Ron sighed and settled in again, closing his eyes to concentrate again.

An hour later Sirius clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. Harry was the only one who had managed the transformation and Ron was the only other one to manage the visualisation spell. But none of the others was the least bit put off.

"Alright everyone, I think that's enough for tonight," Sirius said and everyone groaned. He grinned at them all. "Look, if you lot aren't tired,

you soon will be. I know I am! I suggest you practise the visualisation spell over the Christmas holiday, though I have to ask you not to try the transformation on your own. I know what to do if something goes wrong but you don't."

Everyone nodded and began to drift out of the room until only Sirius and Harry remained. Harry's friends were the last to go; they drifted out of the room discussing Ron's animagus form. Sirius watched them go and then grinned at his godson.

"Well?" he asked.

Harry grinned back. "I think I like being an animagus," he replied then frowned. "But I still don't understand why I can see as the wolf but not as me."

Sirius sighed. "Yeah, I've been thinking about that. James never had any problems seeing when he was Prongs but he always wearing his glasses when he changed. Maybe it's got something to do with the transformation."

"But Wormtail was missing a...a finger from his paw when he was a rat," Harry said.

"True, but that's because he is actually missing a finger," Sirius said, scratching his head. "That may have something to do with it. Pity Moody isn't an animagus."

Harry was about to answer but got stuck on a thought. "Maybe we should ask Master Nhean," he suggested ruefully. "There have probably been Night Warriors who were animagi. I'll bet someone in the Guild has an answer."

Sirius laughed. "Good thought. We'll ask him tomorrow," he said then threw an arm around Harry's shoulders. The two of them headed towards the door. "You're not upset about having to stay here over the Christmas holidays?"

"No, not really," Harry said. "I've always stayed here. The Dursleys never wanted me and, honestly, I liked staying here for Christmas. Ron and Hermione have often stayed and this year it'll be you and Remus." Harry smiled happily at the thought. "And I know that it wouldn't be a good idea for me to go anywhere. It's not safe." He sighed. "Pity, Mr and Mrs Weasley invited me to stay with them. I would have liked to have been part of a Weasley Christmas." His voice trailed off wistfully.

Sirius laughed. "I'm sure you'll get your chance in the future. Come on, we've got about half an hour before curfew. Let's stop by the suite so we can tell Remus the good news about your animagus form. He's got the registration paperwork too."

"You know actually registering takes some of the fun out of it," Harry said wryly.

"Tell me about it," Sirius replied humorously as they walked down the corridors. "I'm not sure I like being a good little registered animagus but after my trial, I think Kingsley would have killed me if I didn't register. You know they've tightened security at Azkaban after hearing about how I escaped."

Harry snorted and they made the rest of the way to the suite in silence.

Harry felt a little lonely as he waved off his friends the next morning and he resolutely spent much of the day moping around the castle. Sirius found him up in the Astronomy Tower shortly before and poked fun at him until he was laughing. They then moved some of Harry's things down into the suite where he was going to stay over the holidays and headed down to the Great Hall for dinner. There were only a handful of students staying at school so once again the four House tables were gone and just one table remained for the staff and students to share. Harry and Sirius sat down next to Remus, who immediately pulled out some parchment and waved it at Harry.

Harry sighed and swapped places with Sirius. He and Remus began a soft discussion with Remus filling in various places on the parchment while Sirius watched.

"Everything alright, gentlemen?" the Headmaster asked as he entered the room with Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Yes," Remus said absently as he read the next question. "Just filling out the animagus registration forms for Harry."

This statement effectively silenced the table and the three teachers hurriedly sat down. Food appeared on the table and Professor McGonagall eyed Remus, Harry and Sirius with interest.

"You've succeeded then, Mr Potter," she observed. "May I ask what your animagus form is?"

Harry looked up and grinned at his Transfiguration teacher. "Erm, a Dire Wolf, Professor."

Again silence ranged along the table.

"A great bloody big black Dire Wolf," Sirius confirmed with a grin, "with a white lightning bolt blaze on his forehead."

Harry rolled his eyes. "'Cause nobody's going to know who it is with that particular detail," he muttered sarcastically.

Remus chuckled. "Ordinarily you can't see scars under the fur but that's not exactly an ordinary scar you've got there, Harry."

Harry gave Remus a flat look and Sirius burst out laughing.

"I think that look means 'tell me about it', Moony" he said, still laughing.

"You three seem to be in an extraordinarily good humour about this," Professor McGonagall said curiously.

Harry stopped glaring at Remus and smiled at her. "Well, yeah!" he said. "I'll be able to go with Moony and Padfoot when they run at the full moon. I've always wanted to do that. I hate not being able to help Remus."

Many of the teachers immediately looked worried.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Minerva said, looking at Sirius and Remus.

Sirius snorted. "Well, the first night's bound to be a bit of fun." Remus and Harry swallowed grins. "But I don't a Dire Wolf has much to worry about with Padfoot and Moony."

The Headmaster smiled and the three of them, a twinkle in his eye, as Minerva frowned.

"What precisely do you mean by that first comment, Mr Black?" she said sternly.

Harry and Remus couldn't control themselves anymore and collapsed laughing. Harry had been worried about Remus reaction to his animagus form but Remus had been pleased. Apparently Padfoot could only do so much on his own; they hadn't realised how much having Prongs there made a difference. Remus had immediately realised that the first night was going to bring about a dominance scuffle between him and Harry but he seemed to find the whole things terribly funny which had gone a long way to setting Harry's mind at ease. Remus had made a fairly droll comment along the lines of it being about time Moony had some competition and had smirked at Sirius. The rest of the evening had degenerated into a very amusing round of insults between the two Marauders.

Sirius was the first one to get himself back under control and, seeing the increasingly exasperated look on Minerva's face, he hastened to explain.

"Canines have a pretty strict hierarchy system, Minerva," he said. "You know the whole alpha male thing?"

Minerva nodded and Snape arched an eyebrow.

"You, an alpha male?" he sneered.

"Not me," Sirius said shaking his head with amusement. "Moony's the alpha male in our little pack. Padfoot's not big enough or strong enough to take Moony on." Sirius laughed. "But Harry will be. That Dire Wolf form of his is pretty formidable. The first night the three of run together is going to be interesting."

"A fight?" Minerva asked with concern.

"No, not a fight as such," Remus reassured her. "Dominance scuffling. A pack can only have one alpha male. And I'm not exactly sure who's going to win out of the two of us."

"And Padfoot's going to stay right out of it," Sirius added with a grin.

Harry smacked the two of them. "You two are not making me feel any better about this," he said with exasperation.

"Harry, do you think we could see it?" Professor Flitwick asked excitedly.

Harry grinned a little sheepishly and nodded. He stood up and handed his cane to Remus then moved away from the table. He concentrated on his wolf form and flowed into it. He gave himself a shake and then looked over to the table.

"Very impressive, Mr Potter," said Professor McGonagall admiringly.

Harry opened his jaws and then snapped them shut. A idea came to him and just for a second he gave a very canine grin. Then he leapt over to where Sirius was sitting, grabbed the back of his shirt in his teeth and proceeded to pull him out of his chair and onto the floor. Sirius hit the floor with a thump and Harry immediately settled as much of himself as he could on his godfather's chest.

"Oy, Harry, gerrof!" Sirius wheezed, pushing unsuccessfully at the wolf draped on top of him. "You're bloody heavy."

Harry yawned and settled his head down on his front paws as Sirius struggled underneath him. Sirius rolled his eyes and glared at everyone laughing at the table.

"A little help?" he said desperately, causing the laughter to increase. He growled softly and changed quickly into Padfoot. As soon as he had he leaned forward and nipped at the closest part of Harry he could reach.

The big Dire Wolf yelped and scrambled to his feet then glared at Padfoot. The black dog rolled over and bumped his packmate gently with one shoulder. The big wolf shook himself and nudged Padfoot back. Another look of glee seemed to enter the wolf's eyes and he padded over to the table again. This time he placed his paws on the seat next to Remus and licked the side of Remus' face. His tongue very long and very wet.

Remus jerked away with a startled oath. "Merlin! Harry!" he yelped and wiped the side of his face. "Did you really have to slobber all over me?"

The wolf huffed in his face and dropped back down to the floor. By this stage everyone at the table was roaring with laughter; even Snape had a small smile on his face. Padfoot looked at Harry and Remus for an instant and then bounded over and repeated Harry's actions on the other side of Remus' face. He then ran over and sat down next to the wolf and the two of them gave very canine grins.

Remus sat still for a moment then slowly began laughing. He accepted a towel that a laughing Minerva had quickly transfigured for him and wiped his face. Then he turned to face the two grinning canines.

"I will thank the two of you," he mock-scolled, "to keep your slobber to yourselves or I will get Filius to charm you so that you both can't transform back! Then I will feed you both muggle dog food for a week."

Sirius shifted back and mock-pouted. "You wouldn't dare, Moony! That's just too cruel." He grinned. "Besides you wouldn't be able to put up with the whining for more than a day anyway."

Remus rolled his eyes as Harry also shifted back. Harry paused to re-establish his Oversight then joined his godfather and guardian back at the table. As he did, Snape cocked his head to one side and looked at Harry with interest.

"I am curious, Mr Potter," he asked, "as to how your Oversight adjusts."

Harry blinked. "Oh, er, it doesn't," he stammered. "I can see when I'm the wolf."

The last of the laughter stopped and everyone except for Master Nhean looked at him with surprise.

"Interesting," Dumbeldore said then turned and raised an eyebrow at the diminutive Night Master sitting at his side. "But you don't seem that surprised, Nhean. You obviously expected this."

"Yes," Nhean nodded. "I knew that if Harry was able to manage the animagus transformation he would be able to see in his animal form. The phenomenon was noted by the Guild shortly after the records began. Sato was an animagus. He refused to transform after he was blinded because he feared how he might react. He transformed some years later in an emergency and was startled to find that he could see while he was the animal. There have been a few Guild Warriors who were also animagi and they have all reported the same thing. Unfortunately nobody seems to have an answer as to why it happens."

"Surely people have speculated?" Snape queried sharply.

"Yes, indeed they have, Severus," Nhean replied mildly. "But nobody is sure how to test those theories and speculations."

"Will I always lose my Oversight when I transform?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Nhean said. "Again, many have speculated as to why this happens but no one can figure out a way of testing the theories."

"Great," Harry muttered.

Remus chuckled and poked him in the ribs. "Did you want to finish these now?" he asked, pointing at the almost forgotten registration forms.

Harry sighed and began serving himself dinner as the table settled down around him. "I suppose so."

Chapter 30

Christmas and the New Year passed uneventfully and the rest of the students duly arrived back for classes. The first day back however started with a bang when those students who chose to have the Daily Prophet delivered opened it at breakfast.

"FUDGE GONE!" screamed the headline. Hermione, who was one of those who received the paper, quickly outlined what was in the article to those around her.

"Fudge is gone!" she gasped.

"You mean they've finally chucked him out?" Ron asked through a mouthful of toast.

"No, Ron," she said, scanning the article. "I mean he's gone, he's disappeared. It seems there was a group gathering support to have him thrown out of office but it seems that's not needed anymore. There is no sign of him anywhere. There's going to be an official enquiry, headed by Kingsley Shacklebolt and Amos Diggory, to try and find out where he's gone." She made a tsking sound and shook her head. "Honestly, you'd think these people would work out the meaning of responsible journalism. They're spouting the most ridiculous types of rumours. Oh, this is interesting. The most likely candidate to replace Fudge is Madam Bones."

Harry looked up at her sharply. "I hope that rumour's right," he said. "She'd make a good Minister."

"Yes," Hermione agreed absently as she continued reading the paper. "She'd be a strong leader which is exactly what we need right now and I doubt any of Voldemort's people would be able to influence her."

Harry snorted. "Of course they wouldn't," he said scornfully. "They wouldn't take her seriously."

Everyone in earshot of that comment turned to look at him curiously.

"What do you mean?" asked Susan Bones, leaning over to speak with him from the Hufflepuff table.

Harry gave a start of surprise; he hadn't realised he'd spoken that loudly. He turned to face Susan. "She's a woman," he said flatly, "and Voldemort doesn't take women seriously. He thinks women lack the intelligence to be of any worth."

Susan and every other girl in earshot scowled.

"How do you know that particular piece of information?" Susan asked curiously.

"Er, you really don't want to know that, Susan. Trust me," Harry said with a pained expression, gesturing towards his scar.

Susan grimaced and nodded. She started to turn back towards the remains of her breakfast then paused. "Harry?" she said hesitantly. "Do you think I could have a word with you in private?"

Harry looked surprised and then nodded. "Sure," he said, "When?"

"Do you have any classes now?"

Harry thought for a moment. "No, just training. But Master Nhean won't mind if I'm a little late."

"Good," Susan said and stood. Harry joined her and they walked out of the Great Hall. Susan hesitated for a minute when they got out into the Entrance Hall and then led Harry down to the Hufflepuff common room. Harry was surprised at this but was prepared to see what Susan wanted.

The Hufflepuff common room was large and full of comfortable chairs and couches, similar to the Gryffindor common room. Susan settled him into a chair in one corner and sat down opposite him. She looked gravely at him for a moment, chewing on her bottom lip.

Finally she took a deep breath and opened her mouth. "Harry, I...I suspect you probably don't really want to talk about this," she said slowly, "but it's really important for my House. What happened in the third task in the Triwizard Tournament?"

Harry stared at her and swallowed. Susan bit her lip again.

"I...I don't mean the whole thing," she said in a rush. "Just what happened to Cedric. We...we all read the interview you did with Rita Skeeter last year but you didn't really go into that. I know it's painful but Cedric was one of ours and..." She trailed off a little helplessly.

"And you want to know whether I got him killed?" Harry said unhappily.

"No!" Susan gasped. "I know you didn't do that! Voldemort killed him. I...we just need to know..." She stumbled to a halt, grasping for the words to describe what she wanted to say. "We need to know, Harry. We need to know whether it was because something Cedric did. Whether it could have been avoided. Whether it was just an accident. I...it's hard to explain."

Harry nodded slowly. "Alright," he said slowly. "I think I understand." He paused and ran a hand through his hair. "Cedric and I separated when we got into the maze so I don't really know what happened to him, other than the point where Krum was using Crucio on him." Susan gasped and Harry hurried to explain. "He was under the influence of the Imperius spell. It wasn't his fault. Anyway, Cedric and I spilt up again and I didn't see him again until we got to the centre of

the maze. There was an Acromantula coming at him and we fought it but I got injured. I told Cedric to take the Cup but he refused. Said that I should have won it. I said that wasn't the way things went, that he was the winner and he should take the Cup. I couldn't make it over there with my injury, He kept refusing, Susan, I didn't understand it! He was deliberately walking away from the kind of glory Hufflepuff hadn't seen for years."

Susan chuckled sadly. "It's obvious you're not a Hufflepuff, Harry. We believe in fair play. He thought you had won and it wouldn't have been fair for him to take that away."

"But he won," Harry said in frustration. "Or he should have! I wasn't even supposed to be in the damn Tournament. And the fake Moody kept helping me. Cedric should have won it!"

Susan leaned forward and patted his hand where it was clenched into a fist on the arm of his chair. "But that's not what he thought, Harry. Why don't you keep going?"

Harry sighed gustily and nodded. "Well, when I finally realised that Cedric was going to be so stubborn and really not take the Cup, I suggested we both take it. That we tie for it, then it would still be a Hogwarts victory."

"Why didn't you just take the Cup on your own?" Susan asked intently.

"Because I didn't win it!" Harry said firmly. "Cedric was the winner but the stubborn idiot wouldn't accept that!"

Susan smiled and gestured for him to continue.

"Cedric agreed to that and we both grabbed a handle each." Harry paused and scrubbed his face with his hands. He really didn't like remembering the next bit and his voice was a little shaky when he continued. "It was a portkey. The fake Moody had turned the Cup into a portkey. When we got to the graveyard, we both pulled out our wands but we couldn't see anyone. Unfortunately, they could see us. The first thing we heard was Voldemort's voice." Harry's voice became choked and he stumbled to a stop.

Susan patted his hand again and waited silently while Harry gathered himself together.

"He said 'Kill the spare'," Harry said hollowly. "And Wormtail used the Killing Curse. It was so quick, we couldn't do anything. Cedric was...dead."

Harry fell silent again and buried his face in his hands. Susan watched him for a moment and then looked down at her hands.

"Kill the spare," she repeated softly. "Like he was some kind of thing; like you were some kind of thing." Her face hardened. "And he thinks women are nothing more than things!"

Harry raised his face and stared at Susan. He didn't know her that well, so there was very little detail in the ghostly image of her face but what he could see showed determination and something else he couldn't define.

Susan looked up at Harry again. "I know what others think of Hufflepuff," she said, her voice hard, "that we get by only on hard work and that somehow we're not as good as everyone else. Our symbol is the badger, Harry. A badger burrows in the ground and is rarely seen during the day but you should never threaten a badger. They only attack as a last resort but when they do they do it well. Maybe it's time Voldemort found out what it means to threaten a badger."

Her voice trailed off and she fell silent, looking down at her hands again. After a few minutes, she looked up and smiled at Harry. "Thank you, Harry. I know that cannot have been easy for you. I won't keep you from your training any longer."

Harry nodded and rose. He was halfway out the door when Susan spoke again.

"And Harry? When the time comes, when you have to face Voldemort again, Hufflepuff will be standing with you. Never doubt that."

Harry paused and then nodded solemnly. "Thank you. I will be glad to have you all there."

He turned and left the common room.

The disappearance of Minister Fudge consumed to school for the rest of the week. Everyone was speculating on where he had gone and what he had done, fuelled by the constant reports in the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler. A small furore arose on Wednesday when it was revealed that Fudge had drained his entire account at Gringotts and that said account had contained more money than it should. Certainly more money that Fudge could have earned in his career. Harry and his friends had scowled at that news; all it did was confirm their suspicions that Fudge had been taking money from people like Lucius Malfoy.

By Friday, everything was starting to settle down. There was still no trace of Fudge but a detailed examination of the papers left behind in his office seemed to indicate that the pressure had finally gotten to the man and he had simply left of his own accord. Certainly the team headed by Kingsley Shacklebolt and Amos Diggory could find nothing more nefarious than some evidence of Fudge taking bribes and influencing the media to print what he wanted. These two things were of no great surprise to Harry and as such he was more than a little concerned when on Friday evening he was summoned to the Headmaster's office.

When he walked into the office he was surprised to find quite a crowd there. Sirius and Remus were there and he quickly walked over to sit with them and stared around. Also present were Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape, as well as Moody, Tonks,

Shacklebolt, Amos Diggory, Mundungus Fletcher, Molly and Arthur Weasley, Fred and George Weasley, Dedalus Diggle and Emmeline Vance. Most of them were gathered around Dumbledore's desk, examining something on a large piece of parchment. Moody was deep in discussion with Fred and George and the Weasley twins were nodding seriously and occasionally responding to a question.

Harry looked up at his godfather. "Sirius," he asked nervously, "what's going on?"

Sirius looked at him solemnly. "Wait a moment, Harry. I think Dumbledore's nearly finished up there. We're waiting for Master Nhean and then we'll get going."

Harry nodded and settled down to wait. One thing he had learned this year was that if he asked politely people were more than happy to tell him what he wanted to know. Sometimes, like now, he had to wait but knowing that he would be told things had done a lot to help him control his temper.

When the door to the office opened again, everyone looked around. Master Nhean greeted the stares with a raised eyebrow and nodded to the Headmaster. Dumbledore returned the greeting and gestured for everyone to take a seat.

"Thank you all for coming," he said seriously. "Kingsley and Amos have some news that they felt could not wait for the ordinary meeting." He gestured for the two men to continue.

"Thank you, Albus," Kingsley said in his deep voice. "As you all know Amos and I have been heading up the group that has been investigating our former Minister. I won't go into the details of what we have found. It is the information that one of the Order members found that we wish to inform you of. We are just waiting for his arrival with the papers. He found them in the Fudge's personal files yesterday and read them overnight. He contacted us this morning to give us a brief summary of what was in them."

"Who is your source?" Moody said suspiciously. "And what was so damn important in those papers that we have to review the warding here at Hogwarts?"

Just then the door opened and a very pale and disturbed-looking Percy Weasley walked in with a thin leather document wallet tucked firmly under one shoulder. Percy glanced quickly at his mother and brothers, flinching slightly at the glares from the twins, and walked over to Kingsley and Amos. They had quick muttered discussion then Kingsley turned back to face the room while Amos started pouring over the documents. Kingsley gestured for Percy to step forward.

"Percy, if you could tell us all what you have found in these documents," Kingsley asked.

Percy nodded and cleared his throat. "The investigative committee did not know that Fudge kept a number of files in a hidden compartment in his office. I only knew because I accidentally walked in on the Minister when he was putting things in there. I pretended that I did not see what he was doing and he certainly did not mention it to me." Percy shifted a little uncomfortably, obviously a little thrown by the continued glares coming his way from his brothers. "When I

spoke to Kingsley and Amos yesterday morning it became clear to me that they had not found these files. I waited until everyone had gone last night and went to see if they were still there."

"Obviously they were," Moody said in his harsh voice.

"Er, yes," Percy replied. "I pulled them all out and took them home to read over." He paused and ran a shaky hand through his hair. "It seems the Minister had kept detailed records on his dealings with Lucius Malfoy and others that are known to support You...er, Voldemort."

"Cover your arse files," Moody said with satisfaction. "I think I'll have to revise my opinion of Fudge a little. The man wasn't quite as stupid as I thought he was."

A number of eyebrows went up around the room. "What did you call them?" Professor McGonagall asked disapprovingly.

"Cover your arse files," Moody repeated. "The files you put together when you want have that nice warm feeling around your rear end that tells you that if everything goes wrong you can legitimately blame someone else."

"What exactly was in these file, Percy?" Remus asked intently.

"Notes from all of his meetings with Lucius Malfoy and others," Percy replied. "But that wasn't why I wanted this meeting called, Professor Lupin. The last document in the files was report regarding a meeting Fudge had with Lucius Malfoy and a man called Peter Pettigrew two weeks ago. I think it may be this meeting that prompted Fudge to take the action that he did. At this meeting Mr Malfoy detailed a number of things he would like the Minister to arrange for him. Mostly it was just ensuring that the Aurors and other Ministry staff were thoroughly occupied on a particular day. The Minister asked why he wanted this and he reports that Mr Malfoy laughed and said that day was very important for a friend of his. That was the day when his friend would obtain everything that he wanted." Percy paused again and drew in a shaky breath. "I couldn't see any other way of interpreting that other than that being the day that V...Voldemort would attack Harry."

Silence fell in the room as everyone digested that piece of news. Amos Diggory, who had spent the entire time reading through the papers Percy had brought with him, looked up.

"I have to agree," he said. "I've only read through that final report but Percy's report was accurate. If this is right, Voldemort will attack on April 1st." He snorted. "April Fool's Day. Nice choice; he's taking the chance that we will look at the date and assume it's just some kind of joke on Fudge's part."

"But you don't think it is," Dumbledore asked.

"No," Amos replied. "It's just too convenient. So we've got three months to get ready."

Everyone in the room exchanged worried glances and Arthur Weasley got up and walked over to his son.

"Thank you, Percy," he said and pulled Percy into a hug. Percy went with it and gradually relaxed against his father. Molly, Fred and George watched with astonishment.

"Dad!" Fred yelled.

"How can you forgive the prat!" George continued.

"Boys," Arthur said warningly. "Your brother came to me months ago to apologise and he wanted to make amends to the whole family but I wouldn't let him. He was in a perfect position to get information about what the Minister was doing to us. He wasn't happy about it but he agreed to do it. His help has been invaluable this year." Arthur glared at Fred and George as Molly got up and swept her wayward son into a hug.

Fred and George stared at Percy for a long time. He finally broke away from their mother and walked over to Harry under the eagle-eyed gaze of his brothers.

"Harry," Percy said, "I'd like to apologise for the things I said to and about you. I was wrong to place my trust in the Minister and I was wrong to disbelieve you. I should have trusted my family and my own instincts rather than blindly listening to the Minister." He held out his hand.

Harry stood up and shook Percy's hand. He wasn't in the mood to hold a grudge against Percy any more than he'd been willing to hold a grudge against his Aunt and Uncle.

"I accept your apology," Harry said and then grinned. "But I don't envy you the task of explaining things to your brothers and I really don't envy you the task of explaining everything to Ginny."

Percy looked startled for a moment then he blinked and a small smile appeared. "Oh yes, Dad said you and Ginny were going out now." He paused and drew him himself up to his full height and gathered his most pompous expression. "Now then Harry," he said officiously. "What are your intentions concerning my sister? I trust you don't intend to hurt her or do anything to her that we Weasleys wouldn't like, hmmm?"

Harry grinned at Percy. "Of course not," he said with a laugh. "I'm afraid of what Ginny might do to me!"

Percy dropped the pomposity and grinned, an expression Harry hadn't seen on his face since the day Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup for the first time in years. "Yes well," he said, "I suppose I'd be more afraid of Ginny than anyone else in the family too."

The grin disappeared as he saw his brothers walking over and a slightly apprehensive look replaced it. Clearly Percy was well aware of the turmoil he had caused in his family and was not sure of a warm

reception. Fred and George approached with fairly forbidding expressions on their faces.

"You're a right prat!" George said angrily.

"And a pompous idiot," Fred completed.

"How could you think Harry was any of things that Fudge said! You were in the same bloody House as him. You knew him a hell of a lot better than Fudge," George continued.

"Not to mention what your little outburst did to Mum and Dad," Fred said.

Percy held up his hands. "I'm sorry," he said emphatically. "Alright! I've said it a hundred times to Dad. I'll say it a hundred to times to Mum and the rest of you. I made a mistake. I was wrong and I'm sorry. What more do you want?" The last was said a little angrily.

"Nothing," Molly said firmly, coming up behind the twins. "Fred, George, stop it. You two have made mistakes in your lives. You don't get to judge your brother, especially when he has had the intelligence and the courage to realise that he was wrong and to try and make things right. Harry is perfectly happy to accept his apology and I think you two should as well."

"Quite right," the Headmaster said as he came up to the little group. "Could all of you come and gather around when you are done. Don't take long."

The twins stared at their brother for a long moment before they finally stuck out their hands. "Okay, Perce," Fred said. "Mum's right. We've done some pretty dumb stuff ourselves. Just don't betray your family again. We were starting to think you'd gone over to Voldemort."

"I wouldn't do that!" Percy blustered as he shook hands with his brothers. "I'm not a complete fool."

Molly glared at the twins as they opened their mouths to respond to that and ushered them all over to Dumbledore's desk. Harry wormed his way between in between Sirius and Remus and gave them a questioning look.

"It's a map of Hogwarts," Sirius murmured as Professor McGonagall pointed out the location of some of the wards. "Kind of like the Marauder's Map but a bit better."

Harry nodded and listened to the conversations going on around him. He was surprised when the Headmaster addressed him, clearly having overheard Sirius' comment.

"Ah yes," Dumbledore said, "that excellent map of yours. Gentlemen, how good is that map?"

Sirius and Remus shifted uncomfortably as everyone turned their attention to them. For an instant, they felt like they were back in school being hauled in front of the Headmaster again.

"Depends on what you're comparing it to," Sirius said. "For example, if you're looking at the detail in the map, this one is better." He gestured to the map on the table. "I can see a few rooms just without looking too hard that I know aren't on the Marauder's Map. But this map doesn't show the details of where everyone is and ours does."

"How accurate is that?" Moody asked.

"Very," Harry said with a shudder. Everyone looked at him with surprise.

"What do you mean?" Moody asked gruffly.

Harry hesitated. "Er well, in fourth year, when you...er, when you were supposed to be teaching us, it showed Crouch's name, not yours."

"Yes!" Remus said, ignoring Moody's sudden scowl. "And when I was teaching here in Harry's third year, I confiscated that map from him."

"Moony!" Sirius yelled. "What did you do that for?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Padfoot, I was a teacher. You know, a responsible adult. I had to take it, it wouldn't have been right not to." He paused and grinned, looking more like the Marauder of old to Sirius. "Besides I did give it back to him before I left." Moody cleared his throat impatiently and Remus continued. "Anyway, I had the map out when Buckbeak was going to be executed. I somehow thought that Harry, Ron and Hermione would want to go down to see Hagrid before it happened and when they left, instead of being three of them, there were four of them. The map clearly showed Peter's name and then your. That's why I headed down. I could believe seeing your name; it was Peter's I struggled with."

"So your map will show 'em even if they're transfigured or under an invisibility cloak?" Moody asked intently.

"Yes, definitely," Sirius replied firmly.

"Good," Moody said then looked at Harry. "Potter, I want to borrow that Map. Bring it to me after the meeting is over."

Harry nodded and went back to listening to the conversations going on regarding the protection of Hogwarts and the possible tactics that both they and Voldemort could use. As he listened something occurred to him and he looked around to where Professor Snape was standing.

"Professor Snape?" he said. "Should I try and find out what Voldemort is thinking?"

This question brought complete silence to the room and Snape sighed. He exchanged a glance with Sirius; for once they were in complete agreement.

"What is this?" Kingsley asked curiously.

"Oh," Harry said and sighed, a rueful smile playing on his lips. "I guess neither of you told anybody about that."

"Uh, no, we didn't," Sirius said. "We didn't want to risk anybody getting overexcited about it and putting you in danger."

Harry blinked at that and quickly dismissed the thought. "Oh, okay, but would it be a good idea?" he persisted.

"Personally, I don't think so," Sirius said bluntly, "but Snape's the best one to know."

Severus thought for a moment and grimaced. "It would be...extraordinarily helpful," he said slowly, "but also incredibly dangerous." He paused and seemed to come to some sort of decision. "We do it together," he said flatly. "We have worked

together long enough that our minds should be able to mesh well. We go in together and you will allow me to protect you."

Harry grimaced; this was not something he had expected. He and Snape had gotten reasonably comfortable working together, mostly by not dwelling on what had gone on previously and acting as though this year was the first time they had met. It had worked extremely well thus far. When they didn't consider their past and concentrated on just working together on what they were doing, they could both forget that they didn't really like each other. An unspoken agreement that they did not talk about anything they might see in the other's mind also helped. But this would be different; Snape had told him about meshing minds in order to work together. They would essentially create a kind of Snape/Potter entity and it would bring their minds far closer than any other kind of contact they had tried before. It would also make it almost impossible to hide things from each other. Harry sighed; it wasn't like he could say no now. By actually offering the suggestion, Snape had indicated that he was amenable to the idea. And it had been his idea.

"Alright," he said slowly and he felt both Sirius and Remus twitch beside him. "When?"

"Now might be best," Snape said flatly. "Before the Dark Lord realises that Fudge has written everything down. I doubt that he would change his plans; he doesn't like doing that. But the knowledge might push him into acting prematurely."

Harry sighed; somehow he'd known Snape was going to say that.

"I want to be there," Sirius demanded as the rest of the Order members looked apprehensively at each other.

"Yes, yes," Snape said irritably. "I was going to suggest that you and Lupin be present, as well as the Headmaster."

The three men nodded their agreement.

"What's this all about?" Arthur said sternly. "What is Harry going to do and why?"

Harry smiled; he'd only ever heard Mr Weasley use that tone before when he was talking about his own children. He felt indescribably happy to have that tone used about him.

"It seems Potter's...link with the Dark Lord has changed somewhat," Snape said archly. "No doubt due to the events during his...escapade in the Ministry last year. He can, if he is very careful, infiltrate the Dark Lord's mind without him knowing."

"What? Really?" Arthur stuttered. "How many times has he done this?"

"Just once," Snape admitted.

"Are you sure it's safe to do this then?" Arthur demanded.

"Probably not," Snape said with irritation, "but Potter has offered and I believe it would allow us to gain invaluable information. I will go with him. He will be as safe as possible."

Arthur nodded slowly and looked at Harry.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Harry?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, Mr Weasley," Harry said firmly. "I didn't have any problems last time and I will be careful."

Mr Weasley nodded, not looking very happy, and watched as Harry, Snape, Sirius and Remus were directed into a small room off the Headmaster's office by Dumbledore.

"Alastor, Kingsley," Dumbledore said, "will you continue the meeting. Make the best plans you can but try and keep them flexible. Don't forget to take into account the students. I will see that Harry's map gets to you as soon as possible, Alastor."

The others nodded and Dumbledore also disappeared into the adjacent room, shutting the door behind him. Arthur stared at the closed door for a long moment.

"I hope they know what they're doing," he muttered to himself as he turned back to the planning.

Chapter 31

Harry and Snape stood in the middle of the small room and stared at each other as Dumbledore set things up for their attempt.

"I trust this will do," the Headmaster said and the two of them turned to find two large comfortable chairs set up next to each other. Three smaller chairs were arranged in front of them.

Snape nodded and gestured for Harry to be seated. He sat in the other chair and turned to look at Harry.

"Relax and clear your mind," he snapped and leaned back into the chair.

Harry snorted but obeyed and very shortly he could feel Snape's mind probing at the outside of his shields. He carefully let them down.

Sir? Is that you he thought carefully

Yes, Potter. Who did you think it would be? came Snape's irritated thought.

Harry squashed down his amusement. *What do we do now?*

He heard a mental sigh. *Let your shields down completely, Potter, and reach for my mind.*

Instructions flashed across Harry's mind and he gingerly lowered his shields and reached. He gasped as Snape's mind seized his and they....meshed.

Dumbledore, Remus and Sirius watched with concern as both Severus and Harry gasped and shuddered and closed their eyes. Dumbledore half-rose but then settled back down as they calmed.

This is very odd thought Harry/Severus *I'm me and yet us at the same time. Is this the way it's supposed to happen?*

Yes replied Severus/Harry *It is a meshing of minds, not a melding. A cooperation between two or more people.*

Oh, okay. Now what? Harry/Severus asked.

We need to become more comfortable with this before we move on Severus/Harry thought *If we need to move fast we have to be able to trust the other. If I am protecting you, you must trust me if I move us without warning.*

Oh Harry/Severus thought nervously. *So what do we do?*

Open your mind and I shall open mine Severus/Harry replied in an odd tone.

Harry shivered nervously and slowly, cautiously, opened his mind. He felt Snape almost seem to sink into his mind and was startled to find himself doing the same in his teacher's mind. In front of him flashed images, thoughts, feelings; the complex mind of a complex man. He saw Snape's childhood, his time at school, his Mastery, his time as a Death Eater, his time as a teacher at Hogwarts. He knew that the man was seeing his life at the Dursleys and at school and everything he felt and thought about that. After an indeterminate period of time they drifted upwards out of each other's minds and settled back how they had been. They were both silent for a time, caught up in what they had seen and felt. Neither felt the need to speak, in truth they did not need to, what they wanted to say was instantly transmitted to the other. For the first time since Harry set foot in Hogwarts, they both felt comfortable with each other. Severus would never lose his dislike for James Potter ! but now Harry understood and could accept the other's point of view. Severus now knew that Harry was not like his father, that it was not in him to bully others, to revel in his own magnificence and more importantly, he now knew why that was the truth.

Do you think that we could be friends? Harry/Severus asked.

Why would you want that? Severus/Harry asked, startled.

Because I'm a Gryffindor and I have a deep-seated need to have oodles and oodles of friends all gathering around me Harry/Severus said dryly and somewhat sarcastically.

Severus/Harry smirked. *Bravo* he said equally dryly.

I learnt from the best Harry/Severus replied *Well? You're evading my question.*

I am a Slytherin Severus/Harry replied then sighed.
Perhaps...Harry, perhaps, in time.

I'm patient. Harry/Severus said cheerfully and received a snort in reply.

Two dreamers in one? How curious. came a hissing voice.

O...Orinda? Harry/Severus asked incredulously.

Ahhh, Sightless One, our Harry. You see well. Orinda hissed. *Who has joined with you?*

Er, Professor Snape Harry/Severus replied.

Yesss, Black Snape Orinda hissed with pleasure. *And where do you go, Sightless One.*

Potter Severus/Harry thought sharply *What...is...this?*

It...it's Orinda Harry/Severus replied wonderingly *My Runespoor.* He turned his attention back to Orinda's presence. *How are you doing this?* he asked incredulously.

Runespoors dream, Sightless One, our Harry Orinda replied. *And we can reach this level with our bonded ones if we wish. Where is it that you go?*

To find the mind of...of our enemy Harry/Severus said. He could feel Professor Snape's awareness watching and listening with interest.

Ahh, dangerous, this is, Sightless One. It is well you take Black Snape with you. Orinda hissed *He will guide and protect. Clever, he is. Thinks like us, he does. We will wait here for you, Sightless One. Go and return soon.*

Th...thank you Harry/Severus said, startled. He turned and located the link and began following it.

Does he always speak to you like that? asked Severus/Harry.

No, not really Harry said absently, concentrating on following the link *That sounded more like a combination of all three personalities than just one.* He paused and considered the idea that Runespoors lived more in their minds than out of them. Perhaps that was why Orinda considered himself one entity, because in here, he was. He felt Snape following his train of thought.

Very clever, Potter Severus/Harry thought. *Perhaps you do have a brain worth teaching after all.*

Harry sighed. *I don't suppose you could call me Harry, could you?* he asked. *At least while we're in here.*

He could feel Professor Snape's surprise. *Very well...Harry* Severus/Harry said carefully.

Thank you, sir Harry/Severus said with relief.

He touched the link briefly again and continued following it. When he reached Voldemort's shields, he searched around again for a weak spot.

Over there. Severus/Harry said and drew their meshed minds towards the area he had sensed.

Yeah. Harry/Severus breathed and he began working away at the weakened area in the shield. After a few moments of watching, he felt the Snape part of their entity join in. Between the two of them they quickly worked a small hole in the shields and they entered Voldemort's mind.

You've done this before. You take the lead. Severus/Harry said shortly. *I'll watch and protect us.*

Harry indicted his agreement and traced his journey from last time and settled in to see what Voldemort was seeing. It took him a moment to work out what was happening but when he did he swore.

He suddenly felt a sense of sardonic amusement and the image of Snape raising an eyebrow flitted across his mind. *Language, Mr Potter. I believe Professor McGonagall takes points for that.*

Harry sighed and fed what he was seeing to the Snape part of their entity. He waited for Snape to recognise what he was seeing. He knew he had when his Potions Professor swore quite severely.

Tsk, ts, Professor Harry/Severus said with a grin. *Language.*

There was silence from Snape for a moment. *Continue looking, Harry. It is best I just keep watch.*

Harry sent his assent and turned back to watching out of Voldemort's eyes. The Dark Lord was pouring over a map of Hogwarts and its surrounds. It was nowhere near as detailed as the map Sirius had described to him and a quick check with Snape confirmed this. It did however show all the detail someone who was planning an attack might need. Next to the map was lying a list of students and their Houses.

Not really much here that we didn't already know or suspect thought Harry/Severus. *Should we stay?*

He felt hesitation from Snape. *How much can we actually find out while we're here?" Severus/Harry asked.

A fair bit, I think, if we're careful. Harry/Severus replied.

Look around for what he knows about the crystal magic he used then, Po...Harry, Severus/Harry suggested. *Whatever it is, is powerful and he's likely to use it when he attacks.*

Okay Harry/Severus said and he moved away from where he was and delicately searched Voldemort's mind. When he found what he was looking for he gently immersed their entity into the knowledge. Harry was startled when the information poured into them and as soon as the flood stopped he pulled them both out.

Whoa he said. *That was weird.*

You've never done that before? Severus/Harry asked sharply.

Er, no Harry/Severus replied. *I just thought it would work.*

There was silence from the Snape part of their entity and then alarm. Before Harry could ask what the problem was they were out of Voldemort's mind and drifting. Snape had pulled them out so hard they had drifted away from the link.

Damn! Severus/Harry said sharply.

Reach for us, Sightless One. We have you, we anchor you. came the hissing sound of Orinda's voice. Harry reached and caught the mental grip that Orinda was extending and their entity was pulled back into Harry's mind.

Be calm. You are safe Orinda said calmly. *All is well.* Then the Runespoor's presence disappeared.

Very useful Severus/Harry said dryly. *My apologies, Harry. I did not realise that would happen when I pulled us out.*

Did he find us? Harry/Severus asked.

No but he was aware something was wrong. Severus/Harry replied.
I thought it best to get us out of there. We had sufficient information for now. We can confirm that the Dark Lord plans to attack and I would like some time to examine the details of this crystal magic.

Oh, okay Harry/Severus said. *So what do we do now?*

We dissolve the meshing. Severus/Harry said and the details of how to do that flashed into Harry's mind. They both followed the procedure and their minds unmeshed and they were alone again. Harry slowly opened his eyes and found both Sirius and Remus watching him anxiously.

"Alright there, Harry?" Sirius asked gently.

Harry nodded and turned to look at Snape. "Sir?" he asked.

Snape's eyes opened and he turned his head until he was looking at Harry. "Yes, Harry?"

This question drew sharp glances from the three watchers.

"You okay?" Harry asked tiredly.

"Yes," Snape said shortly, sounding as tired as Harry.

"So this tiredness is normal?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Snape replied again then levered himself upright and winced. "We managed to confirm the plans to attack Hogwarts, Headmaster. And we also found the Dark Lord's knowledge of the crystal magic he used in the Department of Mysteries but I will need to sort it out in my mind first."

The Headmaster helped his Potions Master to his feet. "Certainly, Severus. Let me know when you have news for me."

Snape nodded and walked quickly from the room.

"Shouldn't he have checked on Harry first?" Sirius said angrily.

"Doesn't need to," Harry said with a yawn. "He knows I'm okay."

"How?" Sirius demanded.

Harry smiled at him and tapped the side of his forehead. "Because he was in here, Sirius. Believe me; he knows that I'm okay. He wouldn't have left if I wasn't."

"Oh, okay," Sirius said, mollified.

Harry frowned for a moment and then shook his head slightly. He knew there was probably no point in telling Sirius that Snape wasn't as bad as he thought. Sirius would just have to figure it out for himself, Harry thought as he yawned again.

Dumbledore smiled gently at him. "I think you need to get some sleep, Harry. Do you think you can make it back to the Tower on your own?"

Harry nodded then hesitated. "Can I stay in the suite tonight?" he asked.

"Of course," Sirius said and Harry nodded again.

Sirius offered a hand to help Harry to his feet and the young Gryffindor stumbled out of the room, waving to Tonks and the twins as he picked his way through Dumbledore's now crowded office. He had a brief thought about staying and finding out what was happening but another jaw-dropping yawn caught him as he thought that and he

quickly dismissed the idea. Sirius and Remus would tell him. He stumbled through the corridors down to the suite and collapsed on his bed, not even bothering to pull his shoes off before he fell asleep.

When he woke he found himself tucked under the blankets, barefoot, and his cane was resting against the bedside table. He smiled sleepily; he really enjoyed this part about having Sirius and Remus looking after him. They really did look after him; they cared. He sighed and reached out lazily to press the button on his clock. He had left it in his room here in the suite as he didn't need it in the dorm. The sound of everyone else getting up usually woke him and, if it didn't, Ron would. 'Ten thirty eight', the clock said in Moody's voice and Harry shot bolt upright. He was meant to be at a Potions lesson right now! He was about to scrabble out of bed when the door to his room opened and Sirius stuck his head in.

"Morning, Harry!" he said cheerfully.

"I'm late!" Harry yelped as he pushed the blankets back.

"No, you're not," Sirius replied. "Snape sent a note this morning, cancelling your lesson."

Harry stopped in surprise. "What? Really? He's never done that before."

"He said he'll be in with Dumbledore all morning; something about crystal magic," Sirius informed him.

"Oh, he must have sorted through everything we found then," Harry said as he climbed out of bed leisurely.

"Apparently," Sirius said as Harry approached the door. "Hungry?"

"Yeah," Harry said emphatically.

Sirius laughed and flung an arm around Harry's shoulders, drawing him out into the living room where covered tray lay on the table.

"Dobby brought this up for you about half an hour ago," Sirius said with a grin.

Harry grinned back and flopped down on the couch. He reached forwards and uncovered the tray to reveal a very hearty breakfast which he quickly tucked into. When he had finished, he settled back into the couch and looked up at Sirius. His godfather was sitting at the other end of the couch, reading some papers, a serious expression on his face.

"So what happened after I left last night?" Harry asked.

"Not much," Sirius said, laying aside the papers. "We made a few plans regarding the defences of Hogwarts and most of us will be spending a bit of time in the next few months putting up new wards and strengthening the old ones. I think Dumbledore wanted to ask you and Snape whether you would be willing to try that whole sneaking into Voldemort's mind thing again in a couple of months when he'll probably have a few more plans settled." Sirius paused. "But only if you feel comfortable doing it."

"It's okay, Sirius," Harry said. "I was fine and I...I think maybe Professor Snape and I are...okay now. Part of what we had to do last night was make sure we trusted each other."

"How?" Sirius asked sceptically.

"By really looking into each other's mind," Harry said bluntly. "We haven't really done that. We've sort of tried to ignore things that we see in each others mind. But we couldn't afford to do that last night. I had to be able to trust him so that if he moved us suddenly I wouldn't fight it and possibly destroy the mesh and he had to be able to trust that I knew what I was doing in there."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably; he wasn't sure he liked where this was going. "And?" he asked hesitantly.

"And we...well, understand each other a bit better now," Harry said. "I understand why he hated my Dad and why he doesn't like you that

much." Harry paused and looked a little uncomfortable. "He...he's kind of got a point there, Sirius. You and my Dad didn't really treat him that well. He...he's got a right not to like you very much."

Harry swallowed and watched Sirius, unsure how that particularly statement was going to be received.

Sirius scowled. "He gave as good as he got, you know," he demanded.

"Yes, I know," Harry said patiently. "But you humiliated him in public, Sirius." He sighed and then his face hardened. "I...I just wish the two of you would stop acting like you're still fifteen. I...I love you, Sirius. You're the closest thing to father I've ever had; you and Remus. But I...I think I respect Professor Snape."

Sirius ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "I...I'll try," he said reluctantly. "But I hope your not expecting us to become friends."

Harry rolled his eyes. "No but a lack of nastiness and hexing would be appreciated."

"I suppose I can manage that," Sirius said with a small smile. "As long as Snape does as well."

"Yes!" Harry said. "I'm sure he got that impression from me last night." He frowned as he realised something. "Where's Remus?"

Sirius was happy to accept the change of subject. "Asleep, I hope."

Harry looked surprised. Remus wasn't by and large a late sleeper, even on weekends.

"He was up pretty late last night reinforcing some of the wards with Mad-Eye," Sirius explained with exasperation. "Damn fool that he is. You think after all this time he'd have learnt not to stress himself the night before the full moon."

Harry started a little. He'd forgotten tonight was the full moon. He grinned. He'd been running with Moony and Padfoot since the first full moon after he learnt how to become an animagus. The first night had been exciting to say the least. He and Moony had circled each other for a few minutes before a full-on dominance brawl had started. Padfoot had had the good sense to stay out of it. It had been a close run thing but Moony had finally come out on top and retained his alpha male status. Blaze, the name which both Sirius and Remus insisted on calling his dire wolf, had accepted this with reasonably good grace but since then there had been one more dominance scuffle between the two of them. Harry's friends had a bit of difficulty understanding how they could have these scuffles and yet not worry in the slightest about them. Harry had tried to explain that it was just a wolf thing but they still hadn't quite got it.

"Is he alright?" Harry asked with concern.

"Yeah," Sirius said smiling. "He just needs to rest. He'll be fine tonight."

Harry sighed with relief.

"Come on, get dressed," Sirius said standing up and offering his hand to his godson. "Ron and Hermione were here earlier. The DA want to work on their animagus transformations today. Since you don't have a lesson, you can come along and help and show off."

Harry grinned and allowed Sirius to pull him up.

Half an hour later they were in the Room of Requirement with about a dozen members of the DA. These were the ones who were really serious about becoming animagi. The group consisted of Harry's five friends, Cho Chang, Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Susan Bones. Sirius quickly set them to work. Ron, who was still the only one to manage the visualisation spell properly, was sent to work with Harry to try the actual transformation. Sirius took the others.

"Mate, you can do it," Harry said bracingly. "If you can manage the visualisation spell then you can do the transformation. Just relax,

concentrate on your animagus form and let yourself flow into the form. Your magic will take care of the rest. Don't try and change."

Ron sighed and nodded. He settled himself down again, closed his eyes and concentrated on the red setter his visualisation had shown. He was then startled when he suddenly flowed into the shape. He yelped in surprise and Harry laughed.

"There you are, mate," Harry crowed. "Look at yourself."

A mirror had surreptitiously appeared in the corner of the room and Ron padded over to look at himself. Yep, there he was, a genuine Irish Red Setter. He doggy-grinned and wagged his tail then changed back into himself.

"Wow!" he breathed in delight and gasped when an excited Hermione threw herself into his arms. He hugged her back and blushed when she kissed him firmly.

"Oh, Ron, you did it!" she squealed.

Ron grinned with pride and a little embarrassment. Hermione kissed him again and headed back to the cushion she had been sitting on, a look of utter determination on her face. Harry slapped his oldest friend on the back and abruptly shifted into the big Dire Wolf. Ron grinned and shifted into the dog. The two of them then proceeded to bound around the room until Sirius grinned and yelled at them to stop. They changed back and Ron grinned.

"Do you think I could run with you guys at the full moon?" he asked excitedly.

Harry blinked and looked at Sirius.

Sirius hesitated. "Well, I suppose so. Just don't tell your mother. That woman scares me and I'd hate to think about her reaction if she knew I was letting you run around with a werewolf, even if it is Remus."

Ron grinned. "You must think I'm barmy, Sirius. I'm not stupid enough to do that!"

"Good," Sirius said. "Oh, and go and see Remus at some point. He's got the registration form you need to fill out."

Ron sighed and nodded. Just then Hermione crowed with delight and they looked over. Hovering in front of her was the image of a large eagle.

"Whoa," Ron said, impressed. "That's a bloody big bird."

"It's a Golden Eagle," Hermione said, almost dazed. "Their wing spans can reach up to 2 meters." She seemed stunned at her animagus form.

Sirius shook his head in admiration. "You can try the change in here but I wouldn't try flying..." he trailed off. Suddenly the Room of Requirement was about the size of the Great Hall. "Okay," Sirius continued, "perhaps you can try flying in here. Try the transformation."

Hermione took a deep breath and ended the visualisation spell. She then closed her eyes and concentrated. After a few minutes she opened her eyes again.

"I feel like I should be able to do it," she said, frowning, "but I can't seem to get there."

"You've got to believe you can do it," Sirius said gently. "You've got to believe you can be that eagle or it won't work. Look, you're still surprised by it. Take a couple of minutes to take it all in and try again."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. She got up and walked over to the bookshelves.

Ron grinned. "Typical Hermione," he said quietly and with affection. "Got a problem, try a book."

Harry chuckled softly and continued to watch Hermione as she calmed herself down with her reading. After a few minutes, she put the book down and went back to her cushion. Harry waved to Sirius and gestured towards Hermione. Sirius wandered over just as Hermione closed her eyes again. The three of them watched with anticipation. Ron had voiced the opinion just after they got back from their Christmas holidays that Hermione would managed the transformation as soon as she managed the visualisation and the three of them were now hoping he was right.

Hermione concentrated on her eagle form and like Harry and Ron before her was startled when she suddenly flowed into the eagle. She hopped around in surprise for a moment and gave a small cry before settling down. She looked around and snapped her beak a couple of times before spreading her wings out and admiring them. She had beautiful dark brown plumage that shaded to a golden colour on her neck and head and a short, dark hooked beak with a yellow cere. She flapped her wings tentatively and let out a startled squawk when her feet left the ground momentarily. She settled back onto the ground with her wings still spread and gave her head a quick shake. She then flapped her wings more forcefully and, to the delight of all those watching, took off. She was a little shaky in the air at first but as she slowly flapped around the Room of Requirement her flight became more confident.

Sirius looked around and found what he wanted on a nearby table. He pulled on the long leather glove he had wanted.

"Hermione," he called.

The golden eagle lazily turned and glided back towards them. She eyed Sirius for a moment and they saw a hint of nervousness in her golden eyes. She flew closer and back-winged in for a landing on Sirius arm, taking great care as she closed her talons around his wrist that she didn't grip too hard. When she settled and folded her wings up, Sirius grinned and gently stroked her head.

"Well done, Hermione," he said before gently lowering her to the ground.

She changed back and stood for a moment with her eyes closed and a look of delight on her face. When she opened her eyes she looked straight at Harry.

"Now I know why you like flying so much," she said with a beatific smile. "It's wonderful!"

"Why don't you come with us tonight?" Harry suggested.

Hermione smile modulated into an exasperated look. "Harry," she said patiently, "eagles don't fly well at night and I really don't think smacking into every tree in the Forest would be that good for me."

"Oh," Harry said looking slightly abashed, "I didn't know that."

Hermione was about to answer when they heard a yell from behind them. The three friends turned around and saw Sirius crouching next to a delighted Neville. Floating in front of him was the image of a large bay-coloured horse with a white blaze and socks. Hermione frowned and looked around for the book she wanted. Seeing it on a nearby bookshelf, she picked it up and started flicking through the pages.

"Thought so," she muttered to herself and then she spoke in a louder voice. "It's a Clydesdale, Neville." She looked down at the page she had open. "They were developed in Scotland by farmers but have often been used for heavy haulage. They stand between 16 and 18 hands high but can reach over 19 hands and can weigh up to a tonne."

There were gasps from many of those watching and Neville looked at her with surprise.

"H...how tall is 16 hands?" he asked as he eyed the image in front of him, speculation in his eyes.

Hermione flipped through the book for a minute and then did some calculations. "16 hands would be just over one and a half meters and 19 hands would be almost two meters. That measurement is from the shoulder to the ground, by the way, not from the head to the ground."

"Thanks," Neville said absently as he looked intently at the Clydesdale in front of him. He dismissed the image and closed his eyes and concentrated. Those watching held their breath but nothing

happened. Neville opened his eyes again and frowned before trying again. Again nothing happened and Sirius patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't try and rush it," he said with a grin. "It'll happen...eventually."

Neville looked over at him with a wry look and chuckled. Sirius stood up and clapped his hands.

"Okay everyone," he said loudly. "I think that's enough for today. Hermione, Ron, don't forget to get the registration forms from Remus. You can give them back to him when you've filled them in; he'll see that they get to the Ministry."

Everyone groaned but struggled to their feet and drifted out of the room. Neville stood looking down at his feet for a moment before looking up. He concentrated for a minute and then there was a large Clydesdale standing in front of them, pride shining in its eyes. Harry and Ron gave a whoop and grinned at their fellow Gryffindor and Hermione laughed with delight. Sirius grinned and walked over to the huge horse and slapped it on the shoulder.

"Well done, Neville," he said with a barking laugh. "You'd better go with Hermione and Ron to get those forms."

The horse transformed back into a smiling Neville. Hermione and Ron ran over and escorted him out of the room, laughing and congratulating him. Harry looked over at Sirius and smiled.

"Think all of this is going to help when the times comes?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sirius firmly. "Anything that convinces you and your friends that you can do anything you want will help." The smile fell from Sirius face and a worried, almost haunted look replaced it. "He'll be coming after you, Harry. Anything that your friends can do will help. Anything."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He walked over to Sirius and let himself be drawn into a hug.

"Yeah," he said with a heartfelt sigh.

Chapter 32

The next day Harry had let his friends in on what was happening regarding the attack on Hogwarts. They reacted well in his opinion; after the first startled yelps and blustering comments, they became grim and since then they had thrown their full efforts into studying and training. Their sessions with Master Nhean became more and more strenuous; even to the point where they began to resemble small wars. They were now facing multiple opponents both magical and non-magical. The DA had also been informed about what was on the horizon and their sessions were now conducted with extreme seriousness and with a large concentration on the spells and hexes that would be most useful to them in the coming battle.

Nearly two months had passed since that day and Harry was standing in front of the gargoyle at the entrance to the Headmaster's office. Professor Dumbledore wanted he and Professor Snape to try and infiltrate Voldemort's mind again to attempt to discover if there were any concrete plans. He was very nervous about the idea; he was very nervous about a lot of things these days. They had a month until the attack was due. There had been Order members and Aurors in and out of Hogwarts on a regular basis that last couple of months, strengthening the wards and erecting new ones. The new Minister of Magic, Madam Bones, had been extremely concerned when the Headmaster had informed her of the upcoming battle and had extended every bit of help the Ministry could offer. She had also taken Percy Weasley onto her staff, much to his delight.

Harry sighed. "Cockroach clusters," he said and the gargoyle sprang aside, allowing him to go up to Dumbledore's office.

He walked in to find Remus, Sirius, Professor Snape and Professor Dumbledore all waiting for him. None of them looked like they had been sleeping that well, though Professor Snape looked the worst. The Slytherins in the DA had let them know that Voldemort was subtly torturing Snape by sending pain through his Dark Mark almost constantly. Harry had scowled when he had heard that; he and Snape had been getting along rather well since they had meshed their minds. Snape still had his moments when he snapped and snarled but Harry no longer got so offended at what was said. He now knew that his Professor was a man who had suffered many disappointments in his life and his demeanour came naturally. He was also finding that he rather enjoyed Snape's acidic sense of humour now that it didn't tend to be directed at him or his father or Sirius. Snape's biting observations were usually very, very accurate and very, very funny.

"Welcome, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly, indicating for Harry to sit down on one of the two comfortable lounge chairs in the room.

Harry nodded, not trusting his voice to speak normally, and sat down.

"Are you ready?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded again and closed his eyes. Shortly afterwards he felt Snape's mind outside his shields and let him in and they meshed. Like last time they found themselves quickly joined by Orinda.

Travel again, do you? the Runespoor hissed. *Shall I anchor you again?*

Yes, please Harry/Severus said and felt the assent and pleasure from the Orinda presence in his mind.

This time there was no need for hesitation and they flew down the link until they got once again to Voldemort's shields. They were forced to pause here; the shields seemed much denser than before.

The Dark Lord must suspect something. Severus/Harry said.

Or he's just getting paranoid because the time's getting closer. Harry/Severus suggested.

Perhaps. Severus/Harry replied. *Shall we try over there?*

Okay. said Harry/Severus and they worked their way around the shields until they found an area they could work on. It took much longer this time but eventually they opened up a hole on the shields and slipped inside.

Once again Harry settled them into a position where they could see out of Voldemort's eyes and they looked. They were in a study, probably Lucius' again, and spread out on the desk was a detailed map of Hogwarts with scribbled plans all over it. Both Harry and Severus read as much as they could through Voldemort's eyes but were distracted when Lucius walked into the room.

"Master, your Death Eaters are ready," he said as he bowed.

"Excellent, Lucius," Voldemort hissed. "All is in readiness for tomorrow then?"

"Yes, Master," Lucius said.

The Harry/Severus entity gasped and Snape began to draw them out of Voldemort's mind.

Wait! Harry/Severus cried. *Let's stay here. We might be able to find out something more.*

Snape paused for a moment and then Harry felt his assent. They settled back in to listen to the conversation.

"Has Draco been successful?" Voldemort was asking.

"Yes, Master," Lucius replied. "He succeeded yesterday and has been practicing ever since."

"Excellent," Voldemort hissed. "I wish for him to concentrate solely on Severus. My disloyal Potions Master must pay for his treachery and your son will be my weapon."

"Yes, Master. I will inform him of his task," Lucius said, a nasty glint in his eye. "May I know the time of the attack on Hogwarts tomorrow, Master?"

Voldemort stared at the elder Malfoy for a long moment. "Yes, yes, I suppose you must let them know. Midday, Lucius, we attack at midday, when the children are all heading to the Great Hall for lunch. It will be chaos when we attack."

"Most ingenious of you, Master," Lucius said servilely.

While this conversation was taking place both Harry and Severus were taking in as much detail as they could of the battle plans written on the map.

Come, Harry. Severus/Harry said urgently. *We must leave. The Headmaster will need all the time he can to prepare for this.*

He began to draw them out of Voldemort's mind and when they were past the shields Harry once again reached for the presence of Orinda to draw them back into his mind. Once there they quickly unmeshed and opened their eyes.

"It's tomorrow, Albus!" Severus said urgently as he sat up.

"What is?" Dumbledore asked, momentarily confused. Harry and Severus were back far earlier than he had thought.

"The attack!" Severus snapped. "It's tomorrow! Voldemort has fooled us once again. He plans to attack tomorrow at noon."

Sirius and Remus swore and Dumbledore's face became stern. "Are you sure, Severus?" he asked.

"Yes, damn it!" Snape snarled. "Noon tomorrow."

"And Draco has been practicing something that he's going to use to attack Professor Snape," Harry added dryly, noticing that Snape had once again totally ignored the threat to himself. "That's Draco's sole job tomorrow; to kill Professor Snape."

Severus flicked an irritated glare at the young Gryffindor. "That is not important. I am sure I can deal with one idiotic former student."

"Yes, I'm sure you can, Severus," Dumbledore said with concern. "But nevertheless, I would like you to be careful. Do not underestimate him."

Severus nodded reluctantly and Dumbledore looked over at Remus and Sirius.

"Remus, could I ask you to go and gather the teachers and bring them to my office," Dumbledore said firmly. "Sirius, I would like you to go to Grimmauld Place and gather as many of the Order members as possible. Harry, if you would collect your Battle Guard and return here."

Harry, Remus and Sirius nodded and as Harry quickly left the room he saw Remus and Sirius heading towards the fireplace while Dumbledore drew Severus over to the large map of Hogwarts that was lying on a side table. As soon as he got past the gargoyle, Harry broke out into a run. He burst into the Gryffindor common room, startling the occupants. Looking around he found his friends sitting around a table on the far side of the room and gestured for them to join him. As soon as they got out of the room, he turned to them.

"Hermione," he snapped. "Go and get Luna and join us in Dumbledore's office."

Hermione, recognising Harry's 'command voice', did not hesitate and ran down the corridor. Harry led the others back to the Headmaster's office. When they walked in they found the teachers of Hogwarts standing around the office whispering nervously to each other. They settled themselves against one wall, waving Hermione and Luna over when they walked in. Harry refused to answer any of his friends' questions and the other five finally settled back against the wall, their faces full of worry.

Finally the fire flared green and Sirius stumbled through, followed by a number of members of the Order. As soon as they were in Sirius turned around and sealed the floo and Dumbledore stood and called for silence.

"Thank you all for coming," Dumbledore said sombrely. "Tonight I asked Professor Snape and Harry Potter to again utilise the link that Harry has with Voldemort to scout out Voldemort's plans for his attack on Hogwarts." The crowd in the office shifted and murmured, with a few glancing at Harry. "They successfully did this but what they found out is most unfortunate for us. It seems that Voldemort has accelerated his plans. The attack will come tomorrow at noon."

The room exploded in exclamations and curses and the Headmaster held up his hands for silence. As soon as he got it, he continued.

"Thankfully the extra warding has been completed and Harry and Severus were able to get look at some of Voldemort's plans."

He was interrupted at this point by Professor Sprout.

"Headmaster, is there no way of getting the students out before the attack?" she said worriedly.

"I can think of no way of doing that without alerting Voldemort," Dumbledore said gently. "As such tomorrow at eleven, all students

except for those who choose to fight will be sealed within their House dormitories." The Headmaster turned to look at Harry. "Am I correct in assuming that your DA members will wish to participate in this?"

Harry nodded firmly. "Yes, sir. And they'll do well," he said confidently. "And I think you should make the offer to the other students, sir."

"Yes, I intend to, though I will restrict it to sixth and seventh year students only," Dumbledore replied before turning to Kingsley. "How much assistance can we expect from the Ministry?"

"I'll get you as many people as I can, Albus," Kingsley said with a frown. "Though many of the Aurors and Department of Mysteries staff are tied up with the aftermath of a Dementor attack in Yorkshire. I'll pull as many out as I can though."

Albus nodded a thanks and unsealed the floo. Kingsley gestured for Tonks to join him and they quickly flooed out. Dumbledore was about to seal the floo again when Fred and George stepped forwards.

"Wait, sir," Fred said.

"We need to duck back to Diagon Alley," George continued.

"We need to get some things from the shop," Fred finished. Both twins were as serious as Harry had ever seen.

"Going to try out some of those booby traps?" Moody growled.

"Why not?" George said.

"No time like it," Fred continued. "Some of them still need testing and who better to test them on than the Death Eaters."

The twins grinned in such a manner that many of the teachers flinched. That grin was usually the precursor to trouble. The twins flooded out and everyone turned back to the Headmaster.

"Alright, after all of the students are in their dorms I would like everyone to assemble in the Entrance Hall. I would prefer to keep this fight out of the school itself so if we can force it to occur on the grounds that would be preferable. I would like you all to concentrate on neutralising the Death Eaters; leave Voldemort to Harry and myself. Remus, Sirius, Severus, I would like you three to join Harry, his Battle Guard and myself in the centre. The rest of you arrange yourselves on our flanks." He sighed. "I had always hoped that it would not come to this. Be careful all of you. Try to stay together for protection. Now, off you go. Try and get some rest. Minerva will show you to the guest quarters if you wish to stay here tonight. Could the Heads of Houses please inform their students as to what will happen tomorrow though if you wish to delay that for now, Severus, I will understand."

Everyone nodded and a small group quickly flooded out while the others accompanied Professor McGonagall. Harry turned to his friends.

"Go and get everyone from the DA. Meet me in the Room of Requirement."

His friends nodded and ran out of the room. Harry turned to where the Headmaster stood.

"Will he use this crystal magic he's discovered?" he asked calmly.

Dumbledore sighed. "I don't know, Harry, but I suspect he will. This is a bold move from him and I believe he will throw everything he can at us."

Harry nodded slowly. "I'm scared."

"So am I, dear boy, so am I," the Headmaster said with a gentle smile.

When Harry arrived in the Room of Requirement he found the entire DA as well as Master Nhean, Sirius and Remus waiting for him. Before he could say anything, Millicent Bulstrode stood.

"We've told them," she said bluntly. "About the attack tomorrow. We found out about it this afternoon. For most of us, our parents contacted us and told us not to fight or to help Voldemort. What's the plan?"

"We fight," Harry said equally bluntly. "All of the students will be locked inside their dormitories except for those wanting to help. If you don't want to fight, that's where you should go."

"Of course we're fighting," Zachariah Smith said firmly. "You don't think we went to all this effort just to back out when the chips are down?"

Everyone nodded grimly and made soft noises of agreement.

Harry smiled grimly. "Good and thank you. When the students are moved into the dormitories, you need to make your way down to the Entrance Hall."

Master Nhean stepped forwards at this point. "You are all well-trained," he said calmly. "And you are all very skilled. The battle will be loud, frightening and confusing...they always are. Just remember to stick together. Try not to get separated from each other. And remember your training. You can do this."

Heads rose with pride and determination around the room and the nods that came were firm.

"Now get some rest," Harry ordered. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

Everyone nodded and made their way out of the room. Harry turned to his friends, his teacher, his godfather and his guardian.

"I guess we should get some rest as well," he said with a nervous half-smile.

Sirius made a sound somewhere between a groan and a bark. He strode over and gathered Harry into a tight hug.

"Be careful," he said brokenly. "Let your friends protect you. Let me protect you. Let Remus protect you."

Harry hugged him back hard, not trusting himself to speak. They finally separated and Harry threw himself at Remus.

"Thank you. Thank you for everything," he whispered and Remus' arms tightened around him.

Remus let him go and the two remaining Marauders left the room. Harry turned to his teacher and bowed deeply.

"Master, I will honour your teaching tomorrow," he said solemnly.

Nhean bowed back and then also drew Harry into a hug. He let Harry go and held him at arms length. "I know you will, Harry. You have been my finest student. It has been my honour to teach you."

Master Nhean bowed again and then he too left the room.

Ron stepped forwards. "Mate, we'll be there with you tomorrow like we've always been." He gave a sideways grin. "Hey, if we could defeat him in First Year, Second Year, Fourth Year and Fifth Year, surely this'll be a breeze."

Harry gave a strangled laugh and took the hand that Ron was offering him. Ron held it for a moment and then dragged Harry into a hug. He let Harry go and nodded before walking over to the door and waiting.

Hermione walked forwards, a proud but grim expression on her face. She looked at Harry for a moment and then threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Harry, you're a great wizard, you know," she said around the lump in her throat. Harry gave her a genuine smile, remembering the last time she had said that to him. Hermione let him go and she walked slowly over to where Ron was standing by the door. Ron hugged her tightly and the two of them left the room.

Harry watched them go then turned to find Neville standing in front of him.

"You and me, huh, Harry," Neville said a little cryptically. "Guess he gets to face both of us."

Harry nodded and a slow smile spread across his face. "Guess he does," he replied and the two boys from the prophecy embraced. Neville clapped Harry on the shoulder and walked out of the room.

Luna then walked up to him, her eyes slightly unfocused. Harry waited and when her gaze cleared he raised an eyebrow at her.

"There are too many possibilities," she said sadly. "I can't tell what will happen."

"Well, that's a good sign," Harry said with a small smile, surprising Luna. She cocked her head to one side as she considered that statement and then broke out with her normal wafting smile.

"You know, you're right," she said and hugged him. Then she too left the room leaving Harry and Ginny alone.

Harry held one hand out to his girlfriend and when she took it, pulled her close to him and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face into her hair. They stood like that for a few minutes before Harry pulled back slightly and kissed her. The kiss quickly deepened and when they finally broke apart, they were both breathless. Harry gently rested his forehead against Ginny's and closed his eyes; happy to just stand there with his arms wrapped around her, breathing in her scent.

"We're going to make it, you know," he said softly.

Ginny was silent for a time. "Yes," she said finally. "Yes, we are. You are going to defeat him and we are going to win."

Harry gently ran the tips of his fingers over Ginny's face and she shivered slightly. He lowered his head and kissed her again. When they pulled apart again, he gently twined his fingers into hers.

"We'd better get some sleep," he said reluctantly. "We're going to need it."

Ginny nodded reluctantly and they left the room, fingers still entwined.

The next morning passed in a blur until eleven o'clock when Professor McGonagall's magically amplified voice ordered all students back to their House dormitories. Harry gathered his friends together and they made their way down to the Entrance Hall, detouring briefly to allow Harry's Battle Guard to gather their weapons. When they reached the Entrance Hall they found the members of the DA waiting for them. They were quickly joined by almost all of the sixth and seventh year students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. The only one's missing were the Slytherins and oddly enough this included the Slytherins in the DA. Harry looked around but still couldn't see them. He shrugged; he couldn't afford to distract himself with that now. He looked around at the students gathering around him; behind them he could see the teachers collecting. Members of the Order, including the Weasleys, and members of the Ministry joined them. Harry turned his attention back to the students! .

"You all know what you have to do," he said seriously. "Remember to stay in groups. Don't let yourselves get separated." The students nodded and, with a little bit of jostling, they settled themselves in small groups. "Good luck everyone," Harry concluded as Dumbledore walked over to him.

"It's time, Harry," the Headmaster said kindly. Harry nodded and they walked out of the front doors. Harry stood just below the steps, his Battle Guard gathering around him. Dumbledore and Severus stood to one side of them with Sirius, Remus and Master Nhean standing on the other. The Order members and Ministry officials ranged themselves on either side and the students took positions behind the adults. Everyone pulled out their wands and, in the case of Harry and his Battle Guard, their swords.

And they waited silently for the battle to come.

Chapter 33

The first sign that Voldemort and his forces had arrived came when a loud explosion sounded from down near the gates to Hogsmeade.

"Testing the wards," Dumbledore said quietly and everyone tightened their grips on their weapons or wands.

Three more explosions followed and then Dumbledore winced.

"The first of the wards is down," he announced and there was some nervous shifting among the Hogwarts defenders.

A flare of red and white sparks and yet another loud explosion sounded.

"Two more wards have collapsed," the Headmaster said and a groan echoed through the group.

"Steady!" Harry said loudly and squared his shoulders. The defenders stilled at his calm tone of voice.

There was another loud explosion and Dumbledore grunted.

"That's it," he announced. "Enough of the wards have been breached that they will be able to enter. Everyone get ready."

There was a general shifting in the defenders as they got ready. The first sign of Voldemort's forces came from the Forbidden Forest. Loud roars indicated the presence of giants. Those roars rather rapidly changed tenor and Harry and his friends could only suspect that the centaurs and possibly Grawp were responsible. They were distracted from these speculations by the sight of a large dragon in the sky. It was pure white with ice blue eyes. It had a line of razor sharp ridges along its back, had bat-like wings and its tail was tipped with an arrow-shaped spike.

"It looks like a Hebridean Black except for the colour," Hermione said.

The white dragon screamed a challenge and swooped down low over the edges of the Hogwarts grounds. As it slowly flew towards the castle, the defenders could see the lines of Death Eaters underneath. The Death Eaters slowed and came to a stop and the white dragon flew up into the air and then dove towards the defenders.

There were muttered obscenities from many of the defenders and Harry stepped forward slightly.

"Hold fast!" he yelled and raised his spell hand towards the dragon. He then lowered it and his eyes narrowed as something occurred to him. He looked quickly around him and then back up at the dragon.

"Dammit!" he swore. "Snape! Move!"

He dashed over to where the Potions Master was standing next to the Headmaster and dragged him away.

"Everyone! Get down!" Harry yelled as he dragged Snape towards the wall of the castle. He was pleased to see that his Battle Guard had followed him. The defenders, now finally seeing what the dragon had planned, threw themselves to the ground. The white dragon swooped down low over them, its claws reaching towards the Potions Master but Harry's plan had worked. They were too close to the walls for the dragon to get to them.

The dragon flew up again and then swept around and landed. As it did this, the Death Eaters ran forward and began to attack. Harry grimaced and pushed Snape over to where Dumbledore was standing.

"Protect the Headmaster!" he yelled. "And try and stay away from Draco."

Snape stared at him for a moment and then ran to stand beside the Headmaster. Harry turned to his Battle Guard.

"Alright," he said in a hard tone. "Draco wants to play animagi. Let's oblige."

With that Harry shifted into his Dire Wolf form, closely followed by Ron into his dog form, Hermione into her Golden Eagle and Neville into his Clydesdale. They were quickly joined by the great black dog that was Padfoot and the five animagi turned towards where the dragon was standing.

"Be careful," Ginny yelled at them and she and Luna ran over to join Snape, Remus, Master Nhean and the Headmaster.

The large Clydesdale snorted and launched himself into a charge. The great Dire Wolf, Blaze, circled around to the left as Padfoot and Ron's Red Setter circled around to the right. Hermione took off and the great Golden Eagle worked hard to gain some height.

The white dragon that was Draco Malfoy snorted as he eyed the charging horse. He shifted slightly and raised his head, drawing in breath. Just as he lowered his head and began to breathe out the great Clydesdale abruptly swerved and swung around to the left. The fiery breath puffed out uselessly behind the horse and Neville swung around and began to gallop back towards the defenders' lines.

Draco roared in anger and frustration and began to follow the horse. This was just the sort of mistake the three canines had been waiting for. The Dire Wolf and the two dogs leapt forwards and began to harry the white dragon. The two dogs began to bite at Draco's legs and underbelly while Blaze headed straight for the dragon's back legs. The first bites from the two dogs, though insignificant in terms of causing injury, caused Draco to roar and halt his chase of Neville. The huge head swung up then around to see what was happening.

He roared at the two dogs and drew in his breath again. Before he could breath fire, a high scream came from up in the air. The Golden Eagle that was Hermione came down in a tremendous dive, aiming directly for Draco's head. The white dragon realised its peril at the last minute and tried to move out of the way but was unable to avoid the impact. The Golden Eagle fell for a moment after the impact but soon managed to gain some air under her wings and flapped back up, blood dripping from her claws while the white dragon screamed and flailed his head, blood flowing from the remains of one eye. The two dogs took advantage of the dragon's distress and darted in to worry at the dragon's underbelly.

Blaze, who had been lurked behind the dragon, now took his chance. He darted in and latched onto the dragon's left hamstring with his immensely strong jaws and teeth. He gave three sharp jerks of his head and tore away a large chunk from the dragon's hamstring. Draco screeched in agony and turned around with an awkward lumber. He flapped his wings and launched himself desperately in the air. He lurched off and flew rapidly away from the castle, over the Forbidden Forest. Harry shook himself and loped back towards the defenders' lines, joined on either side by the Red Setter and Padfoot. The Golden Eagle dropped down to fly over them and the Clydesdale galloped over to join their triumphant return.

"Damn Pansy to the deepest depths of hell!" Blaise said through gritted teeth. He and his fellow Slytherin DA members were pinned down in the Sixth Year boys' dormitory. They had been about to leave to join the Hogwarts defenders after meeting in the room to plan their strategy when Pansy and her cronies had ambushed them. While Pansy only had Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, and Tracey Davis with her, the fact that there was only one entrance, and therefore exit, to the room meant they were effectively pinned down. Blaise knew not to expect

any help from the others in his House. Those that weren't willing to fight for Hogwarts and weren't part of Pansy's group were staying determinedly neutral. This was very Slytherin of them, if somewhat annoying at this point in time. He and Millicent had managed to turn one of the beds on its side to give them some cover.

Blaise looked down at his watch. Eleven-thirty. They had half an hour to get out of here. Snape had shown them how to get past the sealing wards on the dorm but first they had to get out to the common room. Blaise carefully stuck his head around the side of the bed and was forced to drag it back in hurry as a hex flew past his nose. Pansy and her cohorts didn't seem inclined to want to hurt them, just keep them in the room. He looked over at the fourteen Slytherins who had chosen to follow him. He wasn't sure why they had chosen him; he certainly hadn't looked for the job. He sighed and looked over at Millicent.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"I've got ideas," she growled, "but none that will actually get us out of here."

"Harry's going to be annoyed with us," Blaise said contemplatively as he lowered himself to the floor, his back against the bottom of the bed.

"Nah," Millicent said with a shrug. "He'll understand. He'll be annoyed at Pansy and her friends which is something I can deal with. I don't think I'd want Harry angry at me."

"Is that why you joined him?" Blaise asked.

"Of course," Millicent said incredulously. "Don't you get it, Blaise? He beat Voldemort when he was just a baby. Then he did it again when he was eleven and again when he was twelve, fourteen and fifteen. He and his friends put nearly a dozen Death Eaters into Azkaban last year. You've seen him in DA lessons; even blind he's still the best by far. And I've seen him fight. I had to speak with Master Nhean once and I walked into one of their lessons. You've never seen anything like it, Blaise. His blindness hasn't stopped him, if anything it's made him stronger."

Blaise nodded in understanding but Millicent wasn't done yet.

"Now you know as well as I do the price for joining the Death Eaters," Millicent said flatly. "And I'm not just talking about the social cost and the potential cost if the Dark Lord loses. I'm talking about the cost to your own self-respect. Do you really want to kiss the hem of the Dark Lord's robes? Do you really want to grovel in front of him? I damn well know that Harry would never demand that of us. He hates being famous. Have you seen him cringe when people praise him?" She gave a throaty chuckle. "Guy needs to learn how to relax. Look at the way he's treated us during the DA lessons. He treats us just like he treats everyone else. I like that and I would much rather live under a world ruled by an idiotic Gryffindor than one ruled by the Dark Lord."

Blaise nodded; his own reasons for making the choice to follow Harry had been similar. A fair amount of sheer contempt for Draco had also contributed and looking around he could see that his fellow Slytherins obviously shared the same sentiments.

A distant explosion startled them all and the castle gave a small shudder around them. Blaise swore and looked down at his watch again. It had started. He grimaced and looked back at Millicent.

"We've got to get out of here," he said with frustration.

Millicent nodded and crawled past him to peer around the edge of the bed. Again a hex came flying at them, forcing her to take cover again.

Three more explosions sounded and the castle shuddered again. Blaise thumped the back of his head against the bed and thought desperately. Another explosion rattled the castle around them.

"I've got an idea," Blaise said. "Look, we don't really want to kill them. I mean they may be stupid but they are Slytherins. We just need to get past them." Another explosion caused the castle to rumble around them. "We need a distraction so that we can get out from behind this damn bed and start casting some spells. Millicent, do you think you could manage your Patronus?"

The burly girl looked startled and then nodded slowly.

"Good," Blaise said. "Cast it and get it to charge at Pansy and her group. It'll probably knock them off balance long enough for us to get out from behind here and get moving."

Millicent nodded and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and concentrated for a moment then yelled, "Expecto Patronum!"

A large bull burst out from the end of her wand.

"Charge them," she shouted at it and the bull obligingly lowered its horns and charged out of the dormitory door.

Shouts and exclamations came from the hallway and Blaise stood.

"Now!" he yelled and the DA Slytherins leapt out from behind the bed, their wands out, and ran for the doorway. As Blaise ran through the door he began throwing hexes; his group following suit when they too got into the corridor.

The large silvery bull faded from view and now the two groups of Slytherins were facing each other in the hall. They stared at each other for a moment and then the charms and hexes flew. Each group remained standing, no one ducked away from this confrontation though ducking the hexes became common. Blaise watched for a moment as the curses flew around him. Crabbe and Goyle were the first to fall; too slow and stupid to get out of the way. Then Blaise heard a couple of thumps from behind him and knew that more hexes had hit. He took a deep breath and carefully raised his wand.

"Stupefy," he yelled and was surprised that it was not just his voice yelling. Millicent had come up beside him and had guessed what he was about. The combined curse flew from their wands and hit the three remaining Slytherins in the other group, blasting them backwards and knocking them out.

Blaise eyed them with satisfaction before turning to the others. "Come on," he said and led them down into the common room.

The room was empty and Blaise suspected that all of the other Slytherins were holed up in their various dorms calmly waiting for the victor to be decided. Blaise sneered briefly at them and touched the door in the set sequence he had been shown by Professor Snape. The door swung silently open and Blaise gestured for his fellow Slytherins to go through. He followed them and shut the door firmly behind himself.

"Come on," he said as he made his way to the front of the group. "I think we've been delayed enough."

The Slytherins pushed their way through the front doors to find the battle in full swing. The Death Eaters were slowly advancing and the defenders were holding their own. Blaise, Millicent and the others slid into place with the other DA members.

Ernie McMillan, Cho Chang and Seamus Finnegan looked around as they arrived.

"Better late than never, I suppose. Nice of you to join us," Seamus said lightly, ignoring the large bruise that was developing on one side of his face. "Get lost, did you?"

"No," Blaise answered, matching Seamus' tone exactly as he threw a curse at an approaching Death Eater. "We had a little trouble in the dorm. Nothing serious; just some party poopers wanting to poop our party."

A grin flashed across Seamus' face. "You've been hanging around Sirius too long," he said.

"Perish the thought," replied Blaise haughtily. He looked over and saw the collection of animagi returning to the defender's lines.

"What was that all about," he said as he ducked a curse.

"Draco paid us a visit," Seamus replied, returning the curse. "He and Harry decided to play 'let's all be animagi'."

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "What was Draco?"

Seamus rolled his eyes. "A great bloody big white dragon," he said. "Never one for half-measures, was Draco."

Blaise looked around but couldn't see either the dragon or the blond ex-Slytherin anywhere.

"So what happened to him?"

"Hermione took his eye out and Harry ripped out a hamstring," Seamus said matter-of-factly. "For some reason, Draco lost his enthusiasm after that. Took off for parts unknown to lick his wounds."

"Now that's a filthy habit," Blaise said with a small grin. Draco had been defeated and in such a public and open manner. After spending so many nights boasting how he would destroy Harry Potter when it came down to a fight.

"LOOK OUT!" Ernie yelled and pushed Cho into the two boys, causing the three of them to fall to the ground. Blaise looked up in time to see Ernie outlined in green light as the Killing Curse caught him full in the chest. He then fell gracefully and lifelessly to the ground; the first of the student casualties.

Seamus and Blaise looked at each other, anger echoing in both their eyes, and they stood and started flinging hexes and curses with a vengeance.

Harry and his fellow animagi returned to their own lines and changed back into their human forms. Harry cursed silently as he was once again faced with blackness and quickly re-established his Oversight. He took a quick look around; the battle was fully engaged and here and there lay still bodies. While most of those still bodies showed the normal energy colours, a few had colours that were slowly fading to the type of black that indicated they were dead. Harry dropped his head for a moment, slightly ashamed to be happy that most of those bodies lay among the Death Eaters.

He quickly raised his head again and found that his Battle Guard had gathered around him once more and that Sirius had joined Snape, Nhean and Remus at Dumbledore's side. He looked up at his friends.

"Come on. I think it's time we started forcing the issue a bit here," he said firmly.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Look all of this is just a side event. You know that. The real thing starts when Voldemort arrives and I don't see him out there. He won't get involved unless he has to and I want to force that to happen," Harry replied.

"Why?" Hermione said, slightly aghast.

Harry grimaced. "Look, there have already been some deaths. I can see that, from the energy colours. I want to get this done with the minimum of deaths and that means forcing Voldemort to come out and play with me."

The others nodded grimly as they realised the truth in Harry's words and the six students stood.

"Let's get the strongest shielding spell we can around us," Harry said, "and get down into the trenches. We're not going to be able to do anything lurking back here. Our advantage lies in our combat abilities; let's put them to work."

The others nodded and in unison they all shouted, "Potens contego!"

A shimmering gold aura flared around them for a moment and then settled, almost seeming to coat them like a second skin and glittering slightly. This shielding spell would protect them from most of the curses and hexes likely to be thrown at them. It wouldn't protect against the Unforgivables but dodging them would be their own responsibility.

Harry looked around. "Ready?" he asked and received five firm nods in reply. "Alright, let's go."

The six students took in deep breaths and burst out of their lines at a run, swords raised and wands ready. There were exclamations of surprise from their own lines and several of the Death Eaters staggered momentarily, clearly surprised at the sudden attack.

"Harry!" yelled Sirius and he lunged forwards. Remus caught him and dragged him back to where Dumbledore was standing, watching Harry with worry and pride.

"He's knows what he's doing, Padfoot!" Remus yelled, desperately trying to convince himself as well as his oldest friend. "We have to protect Albus!"

Sirius stared after his godson, a terrible pleading look on his face, before he turned back to Remus. The werewolf flinched at the look in his friend's eyes; it was an anguished look and Remus was sure his own eyes reflected it as well. The two men stared at each other for a minute then Sirius drew in a deep, ragged breath and returned to his place next to the Headmaster. Remus sagged a little and turned to look at Harry for a second before also returning to his place.

Harry and his friends tore into Voldemort's forces and six different hexes took out six Death Eaters before the others recovered from their shock enough to retaliate. The six friends were battered by the curses that flew their way but the shield spell made sure that none of them were affected.

When the curses stopped, Harry yelled, "Swords and spells. Sweep right, then left."

He then turned to his right and, with his Battle Guard, began to make a sweep through the enemy lines. Though very few of their spells hit the mark in the manner they would have liked and most of the Death Eaters were wise enough to stay well out of the way of their swords, nevertheless the tactic was having the effect they had wished. The Death Eaters were faltering slightly; taking their attention away from the defenders of Hogwarts and turning to face the threat of Harry and his friends. The defenders, many of whom had been standing gape-mouthed at Harry's reckless attack, began to gain the upper hand. Death Eater after Death Eater began to fall to their spells.

Harry was starting to manoeuvre his Battle Guard to the outer edges of the Death Eaters. He could feel the shielding spell starting to weaken far quicker than he had thought it would. He could only speculate that the consistent attacks from Voldemort's forces were taking their toll. He then felt the little quiver that indicated the spell was about to fail.

"Retreat!" he shouted. "Back to our lines!"

The Battle Guard turned and they began to back as quickly as they could towards the castle. A gold light flared momentarily and the slight glitter around them disappeared. A couple of the closer Death Eaters seemed to realise what this meant and flung a flurry of curses in their direction. A quick shout of 'Protego' deflected most of those curses but a well-aimed 'Stupefy' cannoned into Hermione, knocking her to the ground and leaving her unconscious.

Seeing the sudden gap in the defences surrounding Harry, those same Death Eaters ran towards them, throwing more curses. Harry and the others managed to deflect some but they were soon caught by more than they could handle and one by one Harry's Battle Guard were overcome and either knocked unconscious or tied up. Four Death Eaters levelled their wands at Harry and a fifth sent black sparks flying into the air.

With a loud crack, Voldemort appeared in the middle of his Death Eaters, bringing the battle to a sudden halt.

Dumbledore looked around, distracted from the small fracas he had been involved in by that sound and was horrified to find Harry standing helpless. Nohan, Sirius and Remus saw this at the same time and they groaned and swore. Only Snape seemed unaffected though his eyes did not rest on Harry; they seemed to be looking at the grass near Harry's feet.

What Snape had seen was a small flash of orange and black. Harry too had noticed this, though he saw the energy colours of his friend rather than the orange and black. He was therefore not too surprised when the Death Eater closest to him suddenly gasped and started to foam at the mouth. The man fell, convulsing, his face turning black. The other Death Eaters standing there stared at him, unsure how the young student they had captured had managed to affect this. Then the second Death Eater began to react as the first one had and he too fell at Harry's feet, dead. The remaining three Death Eaters stepped backwards and one of them snarled.

"What are you doing?" came Lucius Malfoy's aristocratic voice.

Harry sheathed his sword and pointed at his chest. "Who me?" he said innocently. "Why, nothing, of course."

Lucius snarled again and then jumped back with an oath as the Death Eater next to him collapsed in convulsions. Lucius stepped forwards and back-handed Harry across the face. Harry's head snapped around and when he turned back to face the elder Malfoy, his bottom lip was split and bleeding.

"Like that was going to convince me to tell you anything," Harry sneered as he wiped the blood away with the back of one hand.

Lucius snarled and raised his hand again. Then he suddenly stiffened and his eyes widened. Foam appeared at the corners of his mouth and he slowly toppled backwards to the ground, convulsed twice, three times, then died.

Harry stared soberly down at the body of Lucius Malfoy. A small part of him felt immense satisfaction; the man who had caused so much pain to himself, to his girlfriend, to his best friend and his family, to a small house-elf was dead. Good riddance, was the only thought that rippled through Harry's mind before he turned to face the remaining two Death Eaters. He raised an eyebrow at them and gave them a cheeky grin. They shifted nervously and then the closer of the two gave a yelp and fell, dying.

The last Death Eater raised his wand but before he could do anything a thin skeletal hand was placed on his shoulder. Harry turned to stare at Voldemort. The Dark Lord however ignored him for the moment

and looked down into the grass, clearly aware of what had just killed four of his Death Eaters.

"Go away, little Runespoor," Voldemort hissed in Parseltongue. "You cannot kill me but if you try, be assured I will kill your master."

There was silence from the grass for a moment and then a small hissed agreement. Harry saw Orinda slithering away and watched for a moment to ensure his friend was alright. Then he turned back to face the Dark Lord.

Chapter 34

Harry stared calmly at Voldemort, who stared back.

"Get out your wand, boy," the Dark Lord hissed.

Harry raised an eyebrow. He wasn't sure exactly what Voldemort had planned; surely he remembered the Priori Incantatem that would occur if they duelled. He switched his cane to his left hand and pulled his wand out of his robes with his right.

"Good," Voldemort said gleefully. "Now we will duel, Harry Potter. There will be no mysterious phoenix magic to save you this time. I have strengthened my magic above and beyond anything you or Dumbledore could manage."

It was all Harry could do not to gape. He didn't know! How was that possible? Voldemort did not know that it was the wands themselves that caused the Priori Incantatem and not the magic within either of them. All of a sudden, Harry's spirits soared. He might just get through this alive. He levelled his wand at the Dark Lord.

Voldemort chuckled at his actions. "I will give you one last chance, Harry," he said. "One last chance to save yourself and join me. Think of what we could do together. We could rule the world!"

"Never!" yelled Harry and Voldemort chuckled again.

"Then you die," he said and pointed his wand at Harry.

Harry steeled himself. He knew it wouldn't matter what spell he used just as long as he cast it at the same time.

"Avada Kedavra," Voldemort intoned.

At the same time Harry yelled, "Stupefy!"

The two spells impacted and again the golden thread linked the two wands. Once again the force of the Priori Incantatem took them off the ground and Harry heard phoenix song. He raised the hand holding his cane and looked Voldemort in the eye.

"Legilimens," he said quietly and much to the surprise of the Dark Lord.

Harry was very startled to find himself within the Dark Lord's mind. Huh, he thought to himself, I thought that would be harder. It was with Snape. It was at this point that he felt Voldemort's awareness come hammering at him.

Fool boy! Voldemort snarled. *What do you hope to achieve with this? To have your mind burnt out? Why fight me? Join with me. I can give you anything.*

There is nothing you can give me that I would want. Harry said and suddenly dove deeper into the Dark Lord's mind.

NO! screamed Voldemort and he dove after Harry.

Harry whipped around Voldemort's mind, staying one step ahead. The Dark Lord seemed unable to anticipate his moves and Harry exacerbated this by increasing his zigzagging around. He flew through memories and knowledge; somehow he was able to retain some of the information he saw made him feel sick.

Outside of their minds, the battle continued...

When the Priori Incantatem was diverted by Harry, the Death Eaters were stunned. They watched as their Lord and Master and Harry Potter slowly circled each other, still connected by the thread linking their wands. The Hogwarts defenders were still for a moment until they realised something different was happening. Then Dumbledore called for them to attack. As though waking from a long sleep, a slow rumbling roar built throughout the defenders and then they broke and ran down to join battle with the Death Eaters.

Voldemort's forces were stunned for a long moment and then turned to face the more immediate danger. Within seconds the battle was raging as fiercely as before, though this time the Hogwarts defenders had a definite advantage. The Death Eaters were thrown by what was happening to their Lord and were constantly shooting glances over to where he and Harry still hovered. They ignored the large black dog who ran through the many people.

When Padfoot reached Harry's Battle Guard he stopped and transformed back. He stared at Harry and Voldemort for a minute before turning and, with a quick sequence of Finite Incantatem's and Enervate's, freeing and waking Harry's five friends. Ron and the others stared at the sight above them in disbelief.

"He wasn't kidding about that, was he?" Ron whispered.

Just then Remus ran up to them.

"Dammit, Sirius," he gasped. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

Ron looked over at the two men. Sirius had his eyes glued on his godson and was oblivious to anything else. Remus had clearly taken a few hits on the way over. One of his eyes was blackened and he was clutching at the ribs on his left side.

"What's happening?" Remus asked, clutching at Sirius' sleeve.

A large black raven landed next to them and transformed into Severus Snape. He too stared at the hovering figures before turning to Harry's friends.

"Did any of you hear what was said?" he demanded.

One by one Harry's friends shook their heads, except for Neville. The young Gryffindor looked up into the stormy face of the teacher he feared the most and swallowed.

"You....you mean after the P...priori Incantatem s...started?" he stammered. Snape nodded impatiently and Neville continued. "Legilimens. Harry said Legilimens," he said softly.

A grimace crossed Severus' face. Of all the damn fool moves to try...he stopped and turned back to the floating figures, a thousand thoughts running through his mind. Suddenly he stopped and looked around.

"Orinda," he yelled as Harry's Battle Guard and Sirius and Remus turned to stare at him. "Orinda!"

He jumped backwards with a yelp when the orange and black Runespoor appeared at his feet then crouched down and offered his hand. The Runespoor considered him for a moment and then crawled

up into his hand and wrapped himself around Snape's wrist. For the first time, all three heads turned to face Snape. He found this regard somewhat disconcerting; previously only the right head had acknowledged him.

"Can you take me to where Harry is?" he demanded of the Runespoor. "If I can reach your mind, can you take me to where Harry is?"

The others gasped but Snape ignored them, keeping his concentration on Orinda. Finally the Runespoor's three heads nodded and Snape closed his eyes in preparation.

"Are you mad?" Remus yelled, grabbing his shoulder and wrenching him around. "You can't use Legilimancy on an animal. They don't think the same way as humans, you could get lost in there."

"Do you have a better idea?" Severus snapped angrily. "The Dark Lord has spent years training his mind. Harry will be destroyed if he stays in there too long."

Remus closed his mouth and stared at the Potions Master until Sirius came up behind him and pried his hand away from Severus' robes. Sirius looked up at Snape.

"Find him, Severus," he said quietly, barely audible over the sounds of the battle raging behind them. "Find him and help him."

Severus nodded and looked down at the Runespoor wrapped around his wrist. He hesitated then stared into the eyes of the right-hand head and whispered, "Legilimens."

His mind swirled into that of the snake and for a moment he was completely lost. Foreign thoughts and sensations threatened to overwhelm him. He was just about to scream when he was jerked out of there.

All is well, Black Snape. Orinda hissed in his mind.

"How...how is it that I understand you?" he asked wonderingly. He had never been able to understand the Runespoor before.

Your venture into our mind has changed you, Black Snape. You needed to understand so your mind tried to find a way. In our mind it found that way. Orinda said calmly.

I speak Parseltongue now? Snape asked with growing glee.

We know not of this Parseltongue. Orinda said dismissively. *You understand us, that is all we know. Now come, things do not go well for our Sightless One.*

Severus sent his assent to the Runespoor and quickly found himself dragged along until he reached a double set of shields. He could see them, one set lying within the other.

Our Sightless One, our Harry, lies within. Orinda said. *We cannot reach him but we can sense he weakens. You must help.*

Severus sent an absent-minded burst of assent to the presence of the Runespoor and began to examine the shields. He quickly realised that he needed to find a joint weak spot as the shields lay so closely aligned with each other. He searched around the shields, his frustration growing. Then Orinda's mind touched his again.

Over here, Black Snape. Over here lies what you are looking for. Orinda hissed.

Severus allowed himself to be drawn over by the snake and there in both shields was the weak spot he had been looking for. He threw himself at that spot and began digging at it. It was when he was digging at the second of the shields that he felt it dissolve under his mental hands. He looked at the shield in surprise, realising that the inner shield must be Harry's; that the boy must know he was there. He turned back to the presence of the Runespoor.

Go Black Snape. the Runespoor hissed before he could speak. *We will anchor you."

Severus turned and dove into the Dark Lord's mind.

He quickly located Harry; the boy was obvious. He was diving and darting around madly but he was radiating a weariness that would soon overtake him. Severus waited until he was at the apex of one of his swoops and leapt after him. They collided and, much to Severus' relief, they meshed almost instinctively. Severus took over the movement of their entity and steered them towards the deepest depths of the Dark Lord's mind.

Wh...what? Harry/Severus said in surprise. *P...Professor Snape?*

Severus ignored him for the moment and buried them deep in the darkest corner of the Dark Lord's mind that he could find. He felt the Dark Lord swoop past them but he had not seen where they went and he passed them by. As soon as the active presence left, Severus turned his attention to his student.

Are you alright? he asked urgently and received a feel of assent in reply. He squashed his urge to strangle Harry for his idiocy. With any luck, he'd have ample opportunity later. Unfortunately he had forgotten about the way things were transmitted within a mesh.

Harry chuckled wearily. *I thought you were supposed to protect me from Voldemort, not do his job for him.*

Severus snarled half-heartedly. *We have to get out of here.* he said instead. *You do not have the training to take on the Dark Lord in this manner.*

Yeah, I was starting to realise that. Harry/Severus said. *Anyway, I think I have an idea for when we get out.*

Are you ready? Severus/Harry said as he readied them to leave.

Yeah, let's do it. Harry/Severus replied.

Severus gathered them together and shot out into the Dark Lord's mind again. Voldemort was there waiting for them and he rushed towards them.

You will die, Potter! Voldemort screeched.

Severus ignored him and rushed towards the hole he had made in the shields. He threw them out and Harry automatically reached out. Severus garnered some amusement out of Harry surprise when his mental hand was caught by the Runespoor again. They were dragged back into their own minds by Orinda and Severus suddenly found himself falling to the ground, still staring at the orange and black snake wrapped around his wrist. He quickly pushed himself upright and looked up at the hovering wizards. He could see when Harry came back to himself as the boy suddenly gasped and shook his head.

As Severus watched the bead-like protuberances on the golden thread began to move. Harry seemed to ignore them as he raised the hand holding his cane again.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry said calmly and a green light shot out from his hand to hit Voldemort in the chest.

Voldemort screamed; a high-pitched scream that caused everyone on the battle field to clap their hands over their ears and look around for the source. As such, everyone there saw what happened next.

Smoke began to appear, rising from Voldemort's very skin and shortly afterwards, fire blazed around him. The Dark Lord burned as Harry watched on. He burned and screamed until finally he seemed to draw inwards as though he was about to implode. Then he exploded. Harry and those closest to Voldemort were thrown metres away and everyone on the field was knocked unconscious.

Thus no one was in a state to see the dark shadow fly off into the sky.

"Do you think he..."

"I'm sure he'll be..."

"...did you see..."

"...hope I never have to do that again."

Harry drifted, listening to the voices that seemed to fade in and out. He was comfortable and warm and he really didn't want to open his eyes. He took a deep breath and muttered something then turned over and went back to sleep.

Ron and Hermione had whipped around when they heard the movement from Harry's bed. They watched as he settled back into sleep and grinned at each other. Finally Harry had moved; they had been so worried.

"Was that Harry?" came a hoarse voice from behind them.

They turned around to find Sirius struggling to sit up.

"Sirius!" Hermione scolded as she rushed over and pushed him back down. "You know you're not supposed to be sitting up." She fussed over him for a moment more before Ron limped up behind her and engulfed her in his arms.

"Leave off, Mione," he said gently. "He was just worried." He looked at Sirius. "Yeah, it was Harry. I think he's just asleep now, rather than unconscious."

Sirius sighed with relief. All of those who had been caught in the near vicinity of the blast had come around except for Harry. Even Snape had recovered consciousness yesterday afternoon and he'd been the closest to the blast. Three days Harry had been unconscious and they had to have been the three longest days of Sirius' life.

Hermione patted him on the shoulder. "We're going to head back up to the Tower," she said softly. "We promised Madam Pomfrey that we wouldn't do too much and I think if we keep hanging around here she's going to take to us with her wand."

Sirius smiled at the image. "You're probably right," he agreed.

The two young Gryffindors smiled at him and left the Hospital wing, hand in hand. Sirius sighed again and settled back into the bed. Remus was refusing to tell him exactly what had happened in the battle, insisting that he should wait until the whole thing could be told to Harry as well. Sirius suspected this was only half the truth; he rather thought that Remus didn't want him getting overly excited. Of all those who had been near the epicentre of the blast, he was the one who had been the injured the worst. While all of them had been thrown some distance by the blast, he had somehow managed to land badly. He wasn't sure how, being unconscious at the time, but he had broken his shoulder quite badly. Madam Pomfrey had been able to stabilise the shoulder and fix the damage but he was stuck here, flat on his back in bed, until she was sure that nothing was going to be damaged again by unwary movement. He sighed again; he was bored. There wasn't really anyone to talk to either; most of

those left in the Hospital wing now were severely injured and were mostly being kept unconscious to allow their injuries to heal. He would have had Snape to amuse himself with but the Potions Master had been allowed to leave the Hospital wing this morning. He sighed again and shut his eyes, willing himself to sleep.

"Really, Albus, I don't think it's necessary to disturb the boy."

"My dear Poppy, I do not intend to. I merely asked you to check whether the young man was awake yet."

Harry drew in a deep breath and opened his eyes. Blackness. He sighed and initiated his Oversight, sighing again with relief when the energy fields bloomed around him. He levered himself up onto his elbows and saw the energy colours of Madam Pomfrey and the Headmaster standing and talking near the door to Madam Pomfrey's office.

"It's alright, sir," Harry said quietly. "I'm awake."

Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore turned in surprise and they walked over to his bed. He could see their smiles in the ghostly outlines over the energy fields. Madam Pomfrey fussed over him for a moment, checking him with her wand, before turning to the Headmaster and levelling a finger at him.

"Five minutes, Headmaster," she said sternly, "and not a second longer."

The Headmaster chuckled and Madam Pomfrey headed back to her office.

"Well, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly. "How are you feeling?"

"Um, okay, I think," said Harry. "I mean, I'm a little sore but I'm okay."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said, pleased. "We have been quite worried about you."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"My dear boy, you have been unconscious for three days and asleep for the last day," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh," Harry said a little stunned then he sat up. "Ginny! Ron! Hermione! Sir, what...how is everyone?"

The Headmaster gently pushed him back down on the bed. "Relax, Harry. Your Battle Guard are all fine. A few minor injuries, that is all. Remus is asleep in his room; it was the full moon last night. Sirius is sleeping over there." Dumbledore indicated with his hand and Harry levered himself up enough to see his godfather sleeping on his back in the next bed. He collapsed back onto the bed as the Headmaster continued. "And Professor Snape has returned to his quarters as well."

Harry sighed with relief and then went very still. "What happened, sir? How many were injured? How many were..." Harry's voice trailed off.

The twinkle faded from Dumbledore's eyes and he became quite serious. "Not now, Harry. We will tell you everything but not now. Tomorrow will be soon enough and Madam Pomfrey would have my head if I upset you now."

Harry nodded, a very unhappy expression on his face. "Yes, sir," he said. "I guess you're right." He paused and thought for a moment. "Is Voldemort...dead?"

Dumbledore frowned. "We don't really know, Harry. We believe he may be but we could not find his body anywhere. None of us could imagine how he could have survived that."

"I sense a 'but' there," Harry said.

"You are correct," Dumbledore said tiredly. "He has survived this sort of thing once before. We know that he must have been experimenting deeply with this odd crystal magic he found. He could not have taken the wards down so quickly and easily without it but whether it has allowed him to somehow survive yet again, I do not know."

"So what do we do now?" Harry asked.

"We recover. We celebrate our victory, we mourn those we have lost and we live life as best we can, Harry," Dumbledore said with a smile. "There is nothing else to be done. I shall endeavour to discover if Voldemort's survival was possible but until we can get a definitive answer either way we can do nothing more than move on."

Harry nodded slowly then smiled. "I think that sounds good to me."

The Headmaster was about to respond when Madam Pomfrey came bustling out of her office.

"I've given you ten minutes, Albus," she said sternly but with a kindly glint in her eyes. "Now I must ask you to stop pestering my patients."

Dumbledore chuckled. "As I greatly value my life, I shall abide by your wishes, Poppy."

The mediwitch scowled good-naturedly and shooed the Headmaster out of the room. She returned to Harry's side and smiled to find that the young man had again fallen asleep.

Chapter 35

Midmorning the next day found Remus helping Harry back to the suite, with Sirius limping along beside them. Madam Pomfrey had been reluctant to let Harry leave but the fact that he was merely tired and sore did not give her a strong argument, particularly when Harry was adamant that he would recover better in familiar surroundings. Sirius had opened his mouth to comment that the Hospital wing was familiar surroundings but had subsided at a glare from Remus.

They walked into the suite to find Harry's Battle Guard sprawled on cushions on the floor and Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape sitting in chairs waiting for them. Remus deposited Harry on the couch and sat down beside him while Sirius also limped his way over to the couch and flopped down on the other side of Harry.

Harry settled himself comfortably and then looked around expectantly. "Alright, are any of you hurt?" he asked bluntly.

There were chuckles from many in the room.

"Honestly Harry, of everyone here, you, Severus and I were the only ones that spent more than one night in the Hospital Wing," Sirius said with a grin.

"Yeah, Harry," Ron said cheerfully. "We got a few bumps and bruises and Neville and Luna had a couple of small gashes and we all got knocked out and deafened for a day or two by the explosion but other

than that, we made it out of that whole thing basically intact." He paused for a moment. "Which when you think about it is pretty much a first for anything we've been involved in."

Harry and the others laughed then Harry turned to his godfather and guardian. "What about you two?"

"A black eye and some bruised ribs," Remus said calmly before grinning wryly. "Which are almost healed. There are some times that I'm glad I'm a werewolf and injury recovery is one of them."

Sirius gave a laugh. "I think I was the worst off out of everyone," he said wryly. "I obviously landed awkwardly when we got thrown by the explosion and I broke several things in my shoulder. Poppy's fixed it up and as long as I don't go swinging from the rafters for the next couple of weeks I'll be fine."

Harry grinned then looked over at his teachers expectantly, an eyebrow raised in question.

Dumbledore smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "Well funnily enough, I was awfully well protected during the battle, Harry, so other than being terribly tired for a day or so, probably because I'm so terribly old, I'm fine."

"I am perfectly well, Mr Potter," Professor McGonagall said primly then she softened. "We were far more worried about you, Harry."

"I am...well," Snape said slowly but with an odd air of triumph in his voice. Harry cocked his head as his sensitive hearing picked up that note of triumph.

"You seem pleased about something," Harry observed lightly.

Snape raised an eyebrow and the students were startled to see a very amused light in his eyes. "Yes, I am," hissed Snape in Parseltongue.

Harry's mouth dropped open in surprise. "What? How?" he stammered.

Snape's lips twitched into a small smile. "Something about my encounter with your Runespoor. I...used Legilimancy to enter his mind. It does not seem to have affected me in any other way however."

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Somehow it seems more appropriate for a Slytherin to be a Parseltongue." Harry looked around with a frown. "Where's Master Nhean?"

"The Aurors and some of the Unspeakables have appropriated him," Dumbledore replied with ripples of laughter in his voice. "They were rather impressed with your Battle Guard, Harry, as well as his and your skills. They wish to learn what you have but Nhean is being

somewhat evasive with them. I believe he was apparating back to the Guild Academy today to speak with the Council about the problem."

Harry nodded with relief and then he drew in a deep breath. "Alright, tell me the worst."

The mood in the room dimmed and everyone looked around at each other before the Headmaster sighed.

"The casualties on our side were not too great, Harry. Some members of the Order that you had not met and some Ministry personnel. Of those you do know...Firenze and Professor Sinistra from the teaching staff; Ernie McMillan, Zachariah Smith and Colin Creevey from the students."

Harry bowed his head; though the numbers were fewer than he had thought there would be, they were still too many for his peace of mind. The others watched him with sorrow on their faces then Ginny stood up and walked over to him. She gently lifted his head and kissed him then settled herself in his lap and wrapped her arms around him, much to the delight of Sirius and Remus. Harry wrapped his arms around her and buried his face into her hair. They sat there for a minute or so then Harry shifted Ginny slightly in his lap and looked up at the Headmaster again.

"Who else was hurt?" he asked solemnly.

"Fred and George Weasley as well as Bill Weasley were badly hurt," Dumbledore said gently. "They were taken to St Mungo's and their prognosis is excellent. Molly and Arthur are with them. Nymphadora Tonks had her hip badly broken; she will be fine but will probably be left with a permanent limp. Alastor Moody is suffering from the after effects of repeated exposure to the Cruciatus curse but is expected to recover. Professor Flitwick is still being affected by some of the curses he received. It's left him with an odd tendency to break out into show tunes but the experts at St Mungo's expect it to wear off in a few days. Seamus Finnegan and Blaise Zabini have suffered from extensive bruising, apparently due to being thrown against the castle wall repeatedly by a disgruntled Death Eater. Cho Chang, Michael Corner and Susan Bones are suffering from a particularly strong but somewhat intermittent version of the Jelly-Legs curse so if you see them lying on the floor, do help them out. Millicent Bulstrode is walking around in quite a temper but I gather that has little to do with the battle itself. Oh, and Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Theodore Nott and Tracey Davis are currently in the Hospital wing suffering from a truly remarkable assemblage of curses and a severe lack of memory as to how they received them. This is somewhat concerning as they were believed to be safely locked up in the Slytherin dormitory at the time." The Headmaster's voice was remarkably lacking in concern at this last statement and his eyes twinkled.

Harry swallowed and breathed a sigh of relief. It was not as bad as he had feared; then his eyes narrowed. "And what about the Death Eaters?"

"Ah well, we have already spoken about Voldemort," Dumbledore began. "A number of them were killed or rendered unconscious during the battle and more were captured after your defeat of Voldemort but a few are still on the loose."

Harry groaned. "Don't tell me - Draco Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange and Pettigrew."

"Very good, Harry. Absolutely correct," the Headmaster replied. "I'm afraid those four were not to be found. Draco's disappearance was well-documented but the others, well, what happened to them we cannot say."

Harry sighed. "Of all the Death Eaters to escape, it had to be them."

"Yes, it is unfortunate," Dumbledore mused, "but reports from those who confronted Bellatrix Lestrange during the battle indicate that she is quite insane. This will undoubtedly hamper Pettigrew and Draco rather than help them."

Harry nodded in reluctant agreement. "So what happens now?"

"Now you tell us what happened with you?" Sirius jumped in. "For example, why did you suddenly attack the Death Eaters?"

Harry blinked. "Oh! I was trying to force the issue."

"What?" Sirius said blankly.

"I was trying to force the issue," Harry repeated. "I was trying to get Voldemort to come out of wherever he was hiding. I mean the whole point of his attack was to get to me and all staying within our own lines was going to do was get more people hurt or killed." Harry shrugged and grimaced. "So I forced the issue. I didn't expect the shielding spell to fail so quickly though. That was a bit of a miscalculation. I should have called the retreat much sooner than I did to allow us to recast the spell. I messed up that one."

Hermione frowned. "Not really, Harry. I mean we've used that spell a number of times but I don't think we'd ever been hit with that many curses and hexes before. You weren't to know that that would shorten the effective period of the spell."

"I still should have anticipated it," Harry said firmly. "I knew the spell was affected by what was cast against it; I should have guessed that it would fail earlier if overly-stressed."

"Harry," Hermione said firmly, "I didn't know that would happen. Now if I didn't know, why should you be expected to know?" She flipped her hair back and affected a prim expression that strongly resembled Professor McGonagall's best. "I am the smartest student in the school after all."

Everyone stared at her for a moment and then the room was filled with laughter.

"You're right, Hermione," Harry said, still chuckling. "You're right. I just...well, I didn't exactly plan to draw Voldemort out in quite that

way." He sobered and shook his head. "I could have gotten you all killed."

"I don't think so," Neville said mildly. "That would have kind of spoiled things for him, wouldn't it?"

"What brings you to that conclusion, Mr Longbottom?" Dumbledore asked.

Neville threw his hands out. "Well, V...Voldemort wants to triumph over Harry, doesn't he? Well, to do that he kind of needs an audience. If he'd killed us, he'd have been missing the most important part of his audience. The horrified and desperate friends."

"Very astute," the Headmaster complimented.

Neville blushed and Ron grinned at him. "Now Neville, you're going to ruin your reputation as a bumbling incompetent if you keep making intelligent and coherent comments like that."

The adults all looked horrified as Harry and his friends collapsed in laughter. They had become accustomed to Neville's ability during their many training sessions but they knew that many of their fellow students only saw Neville as he had been in their first few years. Neville didn't exactly help himself as he was still very shy and reserved in classes. Harry and the others spent a great deal of time teasing Neville about this. The adults stared at them, somewhat baffled, until Hermione finally took pity on them.

"We tease Neville all the time about his schizophrenic tendencies," she said with a laugh. "He's Mr Confident and Skilled in our training sessions and Mr Meek as a Lamb into his classes. Strange boy." She said this last affectionately.

The adults smiled in understanding then Professor Snape scowled fiercely at Harry.

"Now I would like to know what on earth possessed you to try Legilimancy on the Dark Lord," he said acidly.

"I was kind of hoping you'd forget about that," Harry said ruefully to a muted chorus of chuckles. He shook his head slightly. "I...I don't really know why, sir. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I got in really easily; I didn't think I'd be able to do that. I...think maybe I was just hoping to distract him so that I could cast a spell at him." He shrugged. "I just didn't expect to be able to get in like that."

"You got in easily?" Snape queried with a frown.

"Yes, pretty much immediately," Harry replied.

"Odd," Snape mused.

Harry started; remembering something that had almost slipped his mind. "That wasn't the only thing that was odd," he said in a strange tone before looking over at the Headmaster. "Professor Dumbledore? How widely known is the Priori Incantatem effect caused by duelling with brother wands?"

"It's not overly well-known," Dumbledore replied with a curious look. "It doesn't often happen. Why?"

"Well, when Voldemort confronted me, he told me to pull out my wand. He wanted to duel with me and he said something about me not having the advantage of phoenix magic this time." Harry frowned. "Maybe that's why I could get into his mind so easily; because he was so surprised about the Priori Incantatem happening again."

"Voldemort did not realise that the two of you share brother wands?" Dumbledore asked keenly.

"No," Harry said. "I think maybe he thought what happened in the graveyard was some magic of yours. Who really knows?"

Dumbledore frowned and shook his head. "Very odd," he said quietly.

Harry sighed and leaned back. "So what happens now?" he asked.

"There will be a memorial service for the teachers and students who were killed in the battle," Dumbledore said quietly, "and then classes will resume. There are still things to learn and exams to take."

The students groaned and the adults chuckled.

The remainder of the school year passed peacefully. The memorial service had been simple and profound and although many of the students complained, resuming classes the next day had been a good idea. Getting back to normality had settled things down greatly. Master Nhean had agreed to take over Professor Sinistra's Astronomy classes until the end of the year and many students came up to Harry to tell him how much they liked his teacher.

Pansy and her little group of fellow Slytherins recovered completely except for their memories of what happened to them. The story of what they had done had gotten out none-the-less and they very soon found themselves ostracised. Blaise, Millicent and the rest of their group of Slytherins on the other hand found themselves much admired for their stalwart defence of Hogwarts. This made them wary and suspicious at first but they soon came to accept it. The members of the DA were very pleased with themselves. They had been publicly praised by Madam Bones and they were all to receive special awards along with the other defenders, with the ceremony to be held at the end of year feast.

The Quidditch final had been held, with the two teams being Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. After a long and hard-fought match,

Gryffindor had won by twenty points. They had been trailing badly, suffering from the loss of one of their Chasers, when Harry had caught sight of the purple flash of the snitch and he had chased hard and fiercely to catch it. The spectators, which included Charlie and a recovering Bill Weasley, had widely agreed it to be the best game of Quidditch the school had seen in years. Charlie had been enthusiastic in his congratulations to the Gryffindor team and had conceded that it was possible that Harry might be a better Seeker than he was. This instantly resulted in an invitation to Harry to join the next Weasley Quidditch game to find out.

After the final, they had all had to face the fact that exams were rapidly approaching. While their sixth year exams did not count towards their NEWTs, they were used as general indicators as to how well they were going. Hermione had immediately drawn up study timetables for her four fellow Sixth-Years and extra ones for Ginny and Luna for their OWL revision. There had been much groaning and complaining but everyone had agreed that they should stick to them. Dumbledore had informed Harry that they had made special arrangements for his exams. As he could not actually read an exam written on paper it had been agreed that he would be allowed to use the device Hermione had given him for his birthday and he would be permitted to use a dicta-quill. He would also have a silencing spell cast around him by the teacher supervising the exam so that he did not disturb the others. Master Nhean had also informed him that he too would be conducting an examination of his training; both the physical training and the theoretical work he had been assigned. He had also been told by his teachers that during his practical exams he would be required to attempt each task using both his wand and wandless magic.

Professor Snape had told him that he would also be sitting a special potions exam, both theory and practical. Harry's skills in potions would never be great but he had taken some good steps towards being able to brew some of the more basic potions. He had to do this strictly by rote and with great concentration. Many mistakes

broadcast themselves by colour changes in the potion itself, something which Harry could not see. He had to make sure he followed the instructions absolutely in order to achieve an acceptable result. While he was informing Harry of this Professor Snape had also taken the opportunity to finish the conversation that Harry had deflected after the battle. He had spent time describing Harry's choice of Legilimancy in terms that were sarcastic, snide and decidedly caustic. Some time was spent determining the extent of Harry's intelligence. Harry had managed to listen to the entire thing without grinning; he knew he had scared the taciturn and surly Potions Master with his actions and this was how Snape traditionally reacted to being scared. Harry had apologised and promised to work harder on his mental discipline with him.

All of this consideration of studying and exams had the result of steadying Harry considerably. He had been quite upset by the deaths that had occurred and not even the best efforts by Sirius, Remus and Professor Snape had been able to convince him that they were not his fault. Professor Snape in particular had been quite abrasive and sarcastic in his words but they had had little effect. But the intense concentration of studying had had the effect of allowing Harry to take a step back from the events of the battle and had allowed him to gain a little bit of perspective. That was when what he had been told finally sank in and he gradually stopped blaming himself for something that he could not have stopped.

Eventually they reached the night before their exams and once again they gathered in Remus and Sirius' suite.

"Mione, can't you put the books down for once," Ron groaned as he collapsed on a cushion in front of the fireplace.

"Ron, these exams are very important," Hermione chided as she looked over at her boyfriend.

Ron was looking at her with a very plaintive expression. "Hermione," he said firmly, "you are so far in front of the other students you cannot possibly fail. You've pushed the rest of us so hard that we are all up to date in our studying. I don't think we're going to fail. Can't you take just one night off?"

Hermione opened her mouth to argue with him then sighed. Harry had noticed that the two of them were much more inclined to compromise these days. Ron studied more and Hermione relaxed more. Harry thought it was an improvement.

Hermione put her book down. "I suppose so," she said with a smile and crawled over to join Ron on his cushion.

"Good," Ron said firmly.

Harry and the others chuckled and Ginny snuggled further into Harry's embrace. They were lying on the couch in the reverse of the positions they had taken in the Gryffindor common room that night before school started. Neville and Luna were also lounging together on cushions on the floor. Harry and Ginny and Ron and Hermione had been amused when Neville and Luna had gone down to Hogsmeade together during their last free weekend. They had only just realised that their fellow Battle Guards had started feeling that way towards each other but they were pleased for them and had endeavoured to give them plenty of space whenever they could.

"So what's happening with you this summer?" Ron asked Harry lazily.

"Um, we're staying here for a bit then we'll be going to Grimmauld Place again," Harry replied. "I've asked Dobby whether he would like to work for Sirius, Remus and I." Harry chuckled. "He was literally bouncing up and down he was so happy at the idea. Winky will be coming along as well and Professor Dumbledore's allowing Dobby to 'borrow' some of the Hogwarts house-elves to help clean up the place. I think their first task is going to be to get that portrait down or else Sirius might do something drastic to it."

"Are you paying them?" Hermione asked severely.

"We'll be paying Dobby," Harry replied. "But Winky threatened not to come if we tried to pay her. Sirius and Remus talked it over with Dumbledore and Sirius has offered her a position at Grimmauld Place serving the Black family. She cried when he made the offer to her she was so happy and she accepted it pretty quickly."

Hermione looked disapproving and Harry raised an eyebrow at her. "Winky leapt to accept the offer, Hermione," he said firmly. "You can't force them to accept being paid. That's just wrong. You can introduce them to the idea but if they don't want to embrace it, that's their prerogative."

Hermione scowled for a moment then reluctantly nodded.

"So you get to have a good summer for once then?" Ron asked, trying to change the subject. "Mum and Dad'll want to know whether you're going to come to the Burrow at all. I think they were talking about inviting all three of you."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, that'd be great. Maybe Charlie, Bill and Percy could get some time off work and we could get that Quidditch game going."

Ron grinned back. "Yeah, that'd be great. Oh! I almost forgot." He shook his head. "Well, you already know about what Percy did for the order this year, don't you?" Harry nodded. "Well, he's been going home for dinner a lot since the battle. Mum's really happy about that. Anyway, she owled Ginny and I yesterday; she wanted Percy to move back home but he refused. Apparently he and Penelope Clearwater are getting married. Mum's over the moon."

Ron rolled his eyes and Ginny groaned. "Over the moon doesn't even begin to describe it," she said. "She's been waiting for this ever since Bill graduated. I suppose this will take the pressure off the rest of us for a while though. At least until she starts getting anxious for grandchildren."

Ron groaned again. "Don't even whisper that idea anywhere near her," he said with a tragic expression as everyone laughed.

"So you and Hermione and Ginny and I should start worrying then, should we?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Oh no, we're fine for the moment," Ginny said. "She wants us all to finish school first but once you guys graduate she'll start dropping hints to Ron and then she'll start on us after I graduate."

Harry laughed and Neville and Luna began teasing them. This continued until Remus and Sirius walked in from the staff meeting they had been attending. The two men stared at the laughing teens and shook their heads.

"They've gone bonkers from the pressure of exams," Sirius said grinning.

"I hope not," Remus observed mildly. "Because if they have with all the preparation they've done the rest of the students are a lost cause."

The teens got themselves under control and Harry looked up at his godfather.

"So why did they want you to go to that staff meeting?" he asked.

"They've offered me the Astronomy teaching position for next year," Sirius said blandly then grinned at their reactions. "I've accepted too. I wasn't the best student of Astronomy at school but I did enjoy it." He grinned mischievously. "I think I'll make sure everyone knows where the Dog Star is."

There was general laughter and Harry blinked back a few tears. He had expected Sirius to perhaps go back to the Aurors and had set himself for not seeing his godfather during the next school year, consoling himself with the fact that Remus would still be there, thus breaking the curse on the Defence Against the Dark Arts teaching position. He knew he was perhaps being a little clingy but he wanted to have Sirius and Remus around; he'd had too many years being amongst people who didn't care about him to want to avoid it now.

"Sirius, Remus," Ron said. "Mum wanted to know whether you guys and Harry would be coming over this summer." He paused and grinned at them. "Better say yes or Mum'll kill you."

The two Marauders laughed. "Well, in that case," Remus said. "Of course we will. Tell your Mum to let us know when and we'll be there."

Two weeks later they were all lying on the grass next to the lake, idly watching the giant squid swim around. All of their exams were over and they were finally relaxing.

"Seems a little weird, doesn't it?" Ron said lazily.

"What does?" Harry replied equally lazily.

"Not having death, disaster and chaos hanging over our heads at the end of the year."

"Well, strictly speaking we haven't always had that," Harry said. "It's just this is the first year where we haven't had to think about Voldemort and I haven't had to go back to the Dursleys because of the protections."

"Speaking of the Dursleys," Neville said, plucking blades of grass, "do you know how they are doing?"

"No," Harry said firmly then he shrugged. "I can't really bring myself to care at the moment. I...may write a letter to my aunt but...I don't know."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Neville said, throwing the grass down. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Harry gave a small laugh. "You didn't, Neville, so don't worry. I refuse to let them get to me any more."

There was a companionable silence for a while.

"Has anyone heard anything about Draco?" Ginny asked finally.

Harry blinked. "Oh yeah," he said. "I forgot to tell you guys. Draco is apparently back at Durmstrang, minus one eye and with a severe limp." There were grins at this news. "Apparently it hasn't done much for his disposition. He's been telling anyone who cares to listen that he's going to get me."

"You don't seem worried," observed Luna.

"Compared to Voldemort and his father, Draco is a lightweight," Harry said dismissively. "Dumbledore's going to keep an eye on him but I don't think Draco has the courage to back up his threats. He ran pretty quickly during the battle, didn't he?"

There were chuckles of agreement and they once again lapsed into silence.

Chapter 36 - Epilogue

The Leaving Feast had gone off without a hitch. The awards had been presented to all of the students involved in the defence of Hogwarts and Harry had been prevailed upon to speak. His speech had been short and to the point; he hadn't done it alone, that his Battle Guard, the students, the teachers and all the others who had been there deserved as much credit as he did and that now it was time for a bloody good party. And that is what it had been. Gryffindor had once again won the House Cup by a narrow margin from Ravenclaw with Slytherin and Hufflepuff tying for third. Eventually all of the students had trickled off to their various dormitories for their last night.

The next day was the usual chaos and Harry was glad that for once he did not have to take part. He, Remus and Sirius were staying at Hogwarts for another week while the house-elves fixed up Grimmauld Place; they would then spend the rest of the first half of the holidays there before going to the Burrow for the remainder of the holidays. He helped his fellow sixth year Gryffindors pack and then walked down with them to the Entrance Hall. As soon as he got there, Ginny threw herself at him and he kissed her thoroughly.

"You know, I still think there's something's wrong with that," Ron said good-naturedly as he walked up to them with Hermione, Neville and Luna.

Harry grinned at him as Ginny whacked her brother on the arm.

"You're probably right," he replied with a grin, "but there's nothing you can do about it."

Ron laughed and pulled Harry away from his sister to give him a hug. "See ya soon, mate," he said.

Hermione took her boyfriend's place. "Look after yourself, Harry," she said, "and don't let Sirius get you into trouble."

Harry grinned as he returned her hug and then turned to face Neville.

"No thorns?" he asked with grin.

Neville grinned back. "No thorns. See you next year, Harry. I'll write."

Then Luna was pulling him into a hug. "Have a good summer, Harry," she said quietly and then gave her normal wafty smile. She then shooed everyone away from Harry, leaving he and Ginny alone.

Harry smiled at his girlfriend and pulled her into his arms again before kissing her. They separated in a few minutes when the wolf-whistling and cat-calling from the other students got too much for them and they had to laugh.

"I'll miss you, Ginny," he said quietly and buried his face in her hair.

"Me, too," she replied then she pulled back and shook her finger at him sternly. "You'd better write as often as you can, Harry Potter."

Just then Ron stuck his head back through the doors. "Come on, Ginny!" he yelled. "The carriages are about to leave!"

Harry kissed Ginny again and then gave her push towards the doors. She ran out and jumped into a carriage with her brother, waving out of the window. Harry stood on the top step and waved until the carriages disappeared. He sighed and walked back into the castle where he found Master Nhean levitating his trunks in front of him.

"Master," Harry said in surprise. "I didn't know you were leaving today."

Nhean smiled gently at his student. "I didn't intend to, Harry, but the Council have asked me to return early. There is still some debate going on about how we should respond to the Ministry's request for extra training for their Aurors and they wish to have my input. I will be back next year however. Your training is by no means complete."

Harry grinned with relief. "Oh good," he said. "I'll make sure I keep practicing over the holidays then."

"See that you do," Nhean said sternly, though there was an amused twinkle in his eye. "And do try and keep yourself and your godfather out of trouble."

Harry laughed. "Come on, Master. Everyone knows that's Remus' job."

Master Nhean laughed as well and let his trunks settle on the ground. He walked over to Harry and pulled him into a tight hug. "I have been very proud to teach you this year, Harry," he said fervently. "And I look forward to next year, to see the steps you and your friends will take."

Tears welled in Harry's eyes and he bowed to his Master. "Thank you, Master," he said a little thickly. "It has been an honour to learn from you."

Nhean smiled and levitated his trunks once more. Then he too left the castle.

Harry stood in the large Entrance Hall and listened to the sounds of silence echo through the castle. He was still standing there smiling, his eyes closed, when Professor Snape walked in, heading towards the dungeons.

The Potions Master watched the young Gryffindor for a moment before a small smile flitted across his face. He began striding towards Harry.

"Potter! What are you doing?" he snarled in his most forbidding tones and was amused when the young man's eyes snapped open and he jumped. Snape chuckled lightly and was rewarded by Harry's jaw dropping slightly

"Well, Potter?" he asked.

Harry blinked and then grinned. "Just enjoying the silence, sir," he said.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I thought you enjoyed making a racket with your fellow idiot Gryffindors?" he said acidly.

"Well yes, I do, sir," Harry said blithely, "but I also like the quiet as well."

Snape harrumphed and started heading towards his dungeons. Just as he was disappearing down the stairs, Harry heard his voice float back.

"Have a good summer, Mr Potter. Do remember to study."

Harry chuckled and turned towards the interior of the castle. There was no doubt about it; he was definitely going to have a good summer.

The End